

AO ONI

FOREVER



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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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Illustrated by Karin Suzuragi



Mika

A pretty girl in love with Takuro, she believes in him no matter what. She acts strong-willed and wild, but deep down inside, she's really lonely. Made friends with a strange monster in the Jailhouse that follows her around like a pet.

Takeshi

Takuro's lackey. He talks big but is a huge coward. His parents run a restaurant. He and Naoki used to be friends once upon a time.

Shun

The new kid in town who's desperately trying to figure out the connection between his game and the horror that is the real-world Jailhouse. After going there with Hiroshi to try and find Anna, he was kidnapped by Naoki.

Takuro

Everyone thinks he's a soccer-loving, straight-A student, but underneath that pretty face hides a cruel and brutal monster. Was trapped in the Jailhouse annex with Mika.

Anna

The class president who lost both of her parents at the end of last year and gained the ability to speak with spirits after the accident. She escaped the Jailhouse last time, but her dealings with Naoki dragged her back.

Hiroshi

The smartest kid in class who believes anything unscientific is utter nonsense—or, at least, he did until his dealings with Shun and the gang made him change his mind. Doesn't know what to think of this change.

Kazuya

A classmate who gives Shun an ominous warning.

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Mari

A classmate who's a bit of a plain Jane but has a very serious personality. Unfortunately, she came to school early today on cleaning duty...

Naoki

Takuro and Takeshi's former classmate who died in an accident. He's now a ghost looking for vengeance. His plan was to lure them to the Jailhouse where the monster lives.

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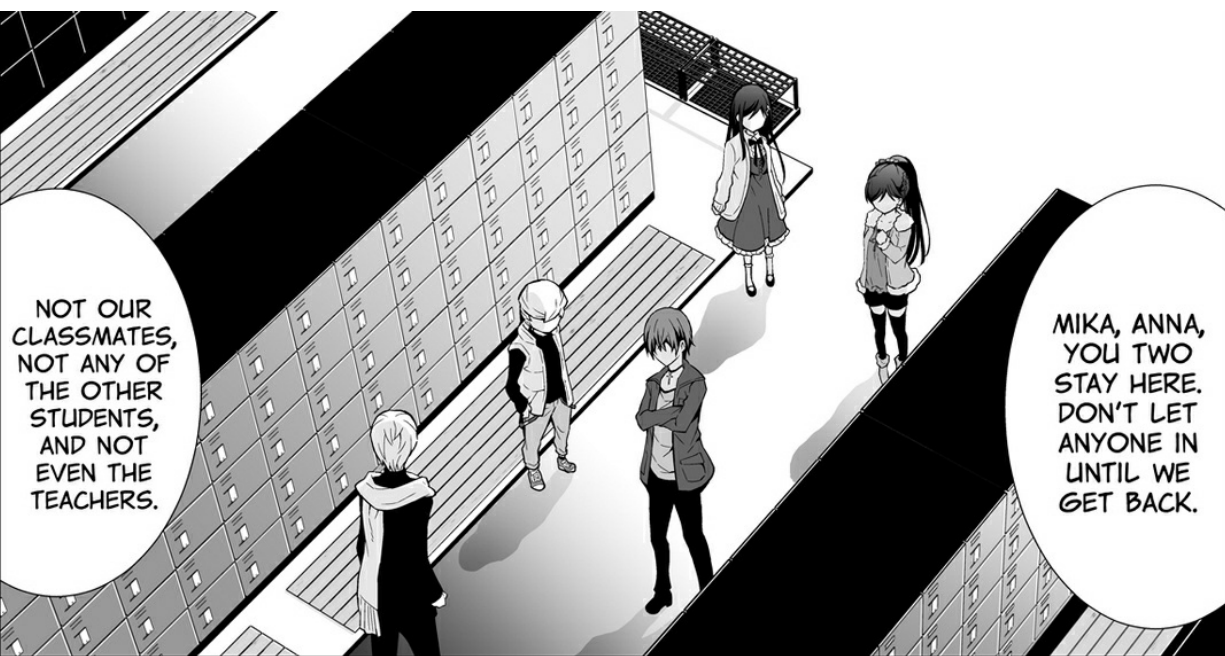
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YOU TWO SURE HAVE GOTTEN CLOSE...

I DARE YOU TO SAY THAT AGAIN!



BUT YOU'RE BETTER AT PLAYING THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS, AREN'T YOU?



THE REST OF US WILL GO SEARCH FOR NAOKI AND SHUN.

KEEP YOUR GUARDS UP.



AND THE JAIL-HOUSE WAS A DEATH-TRAP.



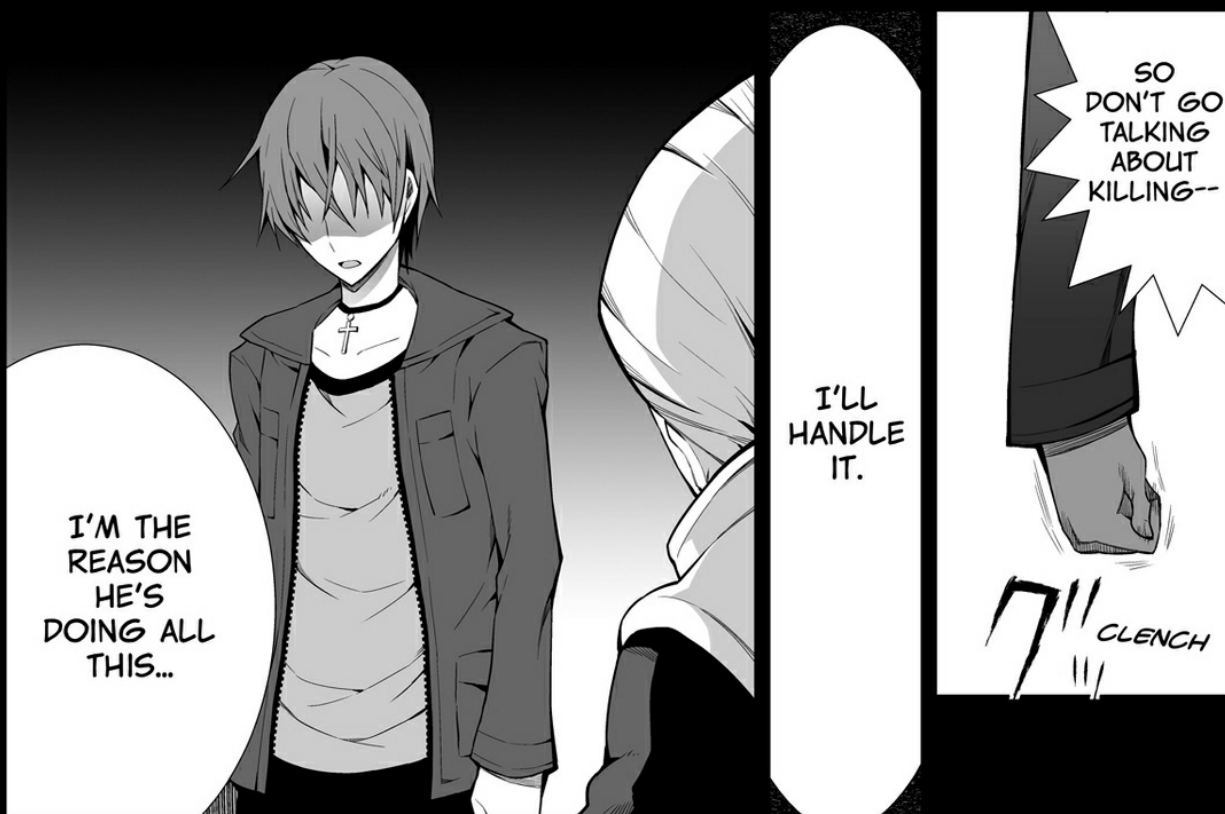
NAOKI REFERRED TO THIS PLACE AS THE JAIL-HOUSE...



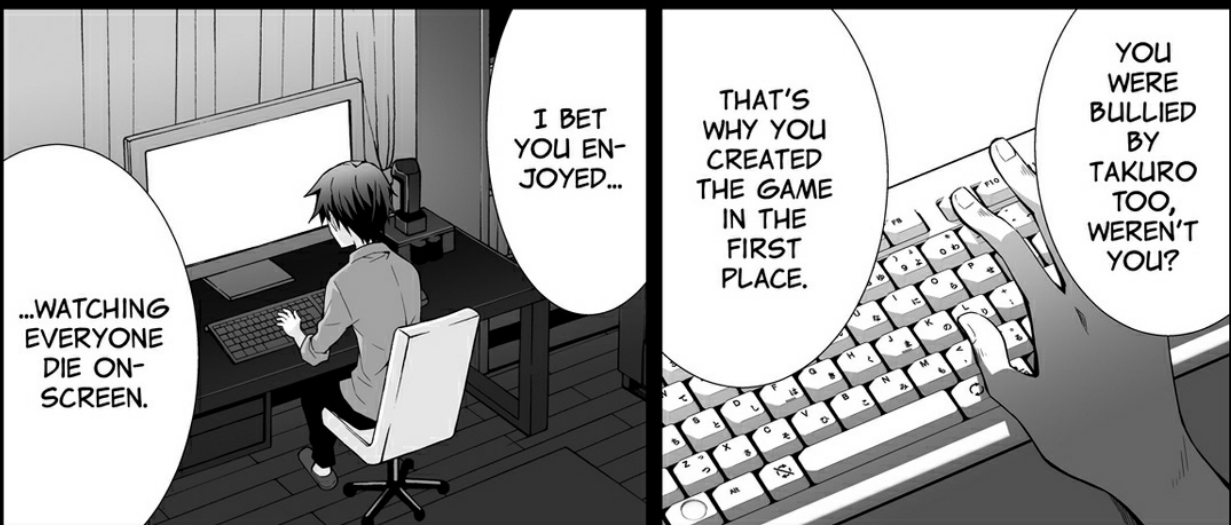
SHOULD THE DOORS NOT OPEN AGAIN, I URGE YOU TO CALL THE POLICE.



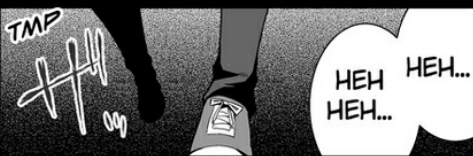
IF WE'RE NOT CAREFUL, WE MAY END UP LOCKED IN HERE AS WELL.







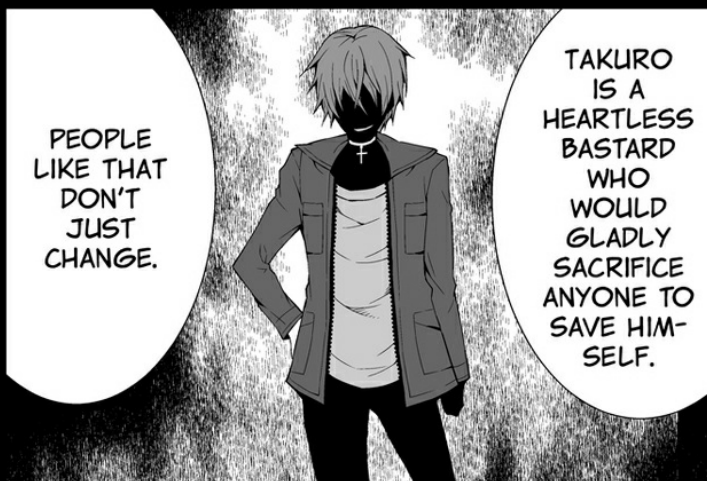






OH WELL.

NO, NAOKI!
TAKURO'S--



PEOPLE
LIKE THAT
DON'T
JUST
CHANGE.

TAKURO
IS A
HEARTLESS
BASTARD
WHO
WOULD
GLADLY
SACRIFICE
ANYONE TO
SAVE HIM-
SELF.



BUT IF
YOU CHANGE
YOUR MIND
AND DECIDE
YOU WANT TO
HELP, JUST
LET ME
KNOW.

WE'LL SEE
WHO'S RIGHT
SOON
ENOUGH.



AH HA
HA HA
HA HA!

I'M SURE
WE'LL BE
THE BEST
OF FRIENDS.

Chapter 1

BAD END

1

She could hear the faint sound of footsteps in the distance. Her little sister started to sneeze, so she quickly clapped a hand over her mouth to keep her quiet.

No! We mustn't be found!

She pressed her free hand against her chest. She worried that each beat of her pounding heart was loud enough to give them away... and every anxious moment that passed safely only made her heart beat faster. Holding her breath, she concentrated all her focus into her hearing. The footsteps came and went repeatedly overhead. Someone was searching for her and her sister.

"Miss?"

Suddenly, the footsteps ceased, and a husky voice called out to her.

"Miss, where are you?"

Saya wasn't a bad person; she was just annoying sometimes. She would scold the girls for any little thing, even running in the halls.

"Oh, no, no, no! That won't do! Young ladies mustn't do such improper things!"

What was so wrong about stretching her legs? No one had ever scolded her for that where they used to live.

"Take off those dreadful clothes and put on the skirt I bought the other day."

"Look at your hair! Have a care for your appearance."

"Mind your manners."

"Don't laugh with your mouth wide open like that."

It was always something. And whenever she asked why, she got the same reply.

"That's how a lady should be."

The girl didn't understand.

A year had passed since they'd moved to this strange land. At first the language here had been complete and utter gibberish to her, but she was finally starting to understand it. She longed to leave the mansion, but at least the grounds it sat on were dotted with flowers that bloomed year-round, inviting butterflies—her favorite creatures—to dance throughout the yard. Living here was nothing like the days of having to hide in that dark cellar.

Every day was filled with joy. Even the stern expressions on her parents' faces had been replaced with smiles. The misery they'd been living in just a year ago seemed so far away now. Like it had all been an unpleasant dream. And that was exactly why she wanted to avoid doing anything to jeopardize this newfound happiness.

She knew that Saya cared for her and her family. Saya just believed that, if they could learn the ways of this new country and act like its people, then they wouldn't come to be hated like last time. Saya was only being strict for their sake. But knowing that didn't stop the girl from rebelling against the ridiculous etiquette being pushed on her. The fact that Saya also resembled the woman who'd chased them out of their homeland didn't help, either.

"Miss, it's time for your studies. Do come out now," Saya called even louder than before.

It was like she knew the girl was there and was simply toying with her.

Please don't let her find us...

The girl shut her eyes tightly and prayed. It wasn't like she hated studying or anything. Learning new words, solving math problems, and trying new things was fun. But every now and again, in spite of how much she was enjoying herself... she had to wonder if this was really okay. Her best friend back home, a young boy her age, hadn't managed to escape. He was still suffering. Was it truly okay for her to be the only one who was living happily?

"Honestly... Wherever could she have gotten off to?"

It seemed the girl's desperate prayers had been heard. Saya's voice and footsteps began to fade away, and eventually disappeared completely. An uneasy silence settled in the air.

“Um...” the girl’s sister mumbled as she tugged on her sleeve. “Where are we?”

It was a good question—the girl finally took a moment to look around. In their flight from Saya and her lectures, she’d led them down the stairs to the basement. There, they’d pushed open an ancient door and jumped through to hide. It was only now that the danger had passed that she had a chance to actually take stock of where they’d ended up.

Saya had warned them quite sternly never to go down into the basement. It was supposedly where the mansion’s owner kept his important things. However, she’d been lucky enough to find the normally steadfastly locked door open today. She’d seen the owner transporting some cardboard boxes into the basement that morning. He must have forgotten to lock up afterward.

Saya had only looked down from the top of the stairs, not daring to descend. It probably never crossed her mind that the girls might actually be down there. The girl’s heart leaped when she realized that they’d—even if inadvertently—managed to sneak their way into the forbidden basement. It was a mixture of guilt over having broken her promise and a curious sense of excited wonder. Her pulse was racing even faster now than it had been while they were hiding from Saya.

A few faint rays of light from the outside world filtered in through the skylight in the ceiling, but it wasn’t enough to illuminate the room. The girl felt along the walls, searching for a light switch.

“I’m scared...”

Her sister held the back of her shirt tightly. She was trembling. Unlike her adventurous older sister, she was quiet and timid. Just like their mother, both girls had one blue eye and golden curls that cascaded over their foreheads. Appearance-wise, they were twins, which was why the girl had never understood how their personalities could be so different.

“Hey... We’re not supposed to be here, are we? Saya will scold us again if she finds us here. Let’s go back to our room.”

“Wait. In a minute, okay?” the girl said, still feeling along the wall.

She might never get another chance to explore the basement again. There was no way she could let this golden opportunity slip away. She bravely continued searching for a light switch, and didn't hesitate to flick it when she found it. Light flooded the room.

“...”

She gulped when she saw what was now revealed to her. Her sister, who'd been so scared just a second ago, let out a gasp of wonderment. The room wasn't full of junk like she'd been expecting. The floor was immaculate, as if every inch had just been cleaned. Antique furniture and household goods neatly decorated the place. They were all old-looking, but everything seemed to be well cared for and purposeful. In fact, their age only made them seem more refined and valuable.

“Look...”

Glancing over to where her sister was pointing, her eyes went wide.

2

A calm settled over her when she saw it—a monument of a giant eyeball about one meter in diameter. Reptilian limbs sprouted from its sides, and the bat-like wings on its back stretched high toward the ceiling.

Her sister uttered something in their native tongue, something she hadn't heard in ages. It was a phrase of reverence used when praying to God.

For this monument greatly resembled the god they worshipped... No, it didn't resemble God. It *was* God.

“What is God doing here?” the girl's sister asked in a hushed tone.

She'd heard from Saya that the owner traveled the world collecting curios. That was how he'd met her father. Perhaps, then, it wasn't that strange to find a monument of their god here.

God's singular eye fixed itself on her. It was as if it was trying to speak to her. She felt an electric tingling running up and down her spine as mixed feelings swirled in her heart. On one hand, she was overjoyed to see God again; on the

other, she was still angry with God for refusing to save them, and she still felt guilty about abandoning their homeland to escape to this country. It was all overwhelming. Was the statue here a sign that God had been watching over them all this time, or a sign that God had come to punish them again? The girl looked away, fearing she would go mad if she stared any longer.

Next to God were wooden boxes of various sizes, the topmost of which was wrapped in heavy, discolored blue paper with odd writing on the side. She recognized it as her native language, but she'd never studied reading it for long enough to know what it said.

The girl cautiously approached the box. Her sister followed, crouched low. She was still scared, but also curious. Water splashed at their feet. The floor in this room was wet like groundwater had been leaking into it.

Ruing her soggy socks, the girl reached out and gently touched the delicately made box. The wood reminded her of the baobab trees that grew in their family's garden long ago when the land was still peaceful. She leaned in closer, and the nostalgic scent of home filled her nose. A slight warmth blossomed in her chest. Even after all the terrible things that had happened there, she still remembered it fondly. Why that was, she couldn't say.

Refocusing on the here and now, her thoughts were consumed with a single question: just what was inside? Unable to contain her curiosity, the girl picked up the box. It was small enough that she could hold it with only one hand. It wasn't too heavy to lift, either. She shook it and heard a light rustling sound. She attempted to rip the lid off, but the paper sealing it was thicker than she'd expected. The girl hesitated for a second, then started peeling it off.

"Hey, are you sure about this? We'll get yelled at if someone finds out," her sister cautioned nervously from behind.

"All I have to do is rewrap it when we're done so that it looks unopened. No one will know," the girl replied as she placed a hand on the lid and lifted it up.

She'd hoped to find some baobab fruit, her favorite, but all she saw were the dried husks of insects about the size of her pinky. The girl hardly ever screamed, but she couldn't suppress the small yelp that escaped her throat. She nearly dropped the box but caught it at the last second.

Collecting herself, she peered inside again. The husks looked like grasshoppers, except that they were blue from head to toe. There were over two dozen in the box. Who would use such a magnificent box to store something so gross? It was just bad taste, in her opinion.

“What’s inside?”

Her sister tiptoed over to try and get a peek for herself, but the girl raised the box well over her head to prevent that. She could see it now—as soon as her little sister saw the creepy bugs, she’d scream loud enough to wake the devil himself. There was no doubt Saya would find them then, and they’d be in a world of trouble when she did.

“Let me see!” she begged, reaching up.

“You can’t!”

Trying to keep the box away from her little sister, the girl slipped a little. The box tilted unevenly, and a single husk went tumbling to the wet floor.



“No fair!”

Frustration warped her sister’s face. Deep wrinkles formed in her brow, and her lips pursed in a severe frown. She was on the verge of tears. And once she started crying, the only one who could soothe her was their mother.

Not good. We’ve gotta get out of here.

The girl closed the box and placed it safely out of her sister’s reach.

“Let’s go,” she urged gently, patting her sister’s head.

Her sister was still pouting, but since the dam hadn’t burst, it wouldn’t take an act of God to calm her down.

“Aren’t you hungry? Let’s go get a snack. I’ll give you my share,” she offered.

“Really?” her sister asked, her expression brightening instantly.

“Yeah.”

The girl nodded, took her sister’s hand, and led her to the door. They needed to hurry. She would have to dry out their socks before Saya found out. But then, as they turned to leave...

She heard a low growl behind her. It sounded like someone was mumbling words in her native tongue. And it didn’t seem to be her imagination. Her sister heard it too and turned around, head quizzically cocked to the side.

“Finally... Free... Humans... Revenge... Free... Humans... Revenge...”

Over and over, the strange voice was repeating the same words.

“Who’s there?” the girl asked, steel in her voice. She thrust an arm out and pushed her sister behind her.

“Humans... Revenge... Revenge... Revenge...”

The strange voice was coming from below... No, something was wriggling on the wet floor. It was the blue insect she’d dropped earlier. She’d assumed it was just a husk, but it was apparently still alive. Its giant eyes swiveled in all directions. She started to scream in disgust when, with surprising strength, it leaped into her open mouth. It was so sudden that she couldn’t even spit it out. She felt a slight pain in her throat. She tried coughing, but the insect wouldn’t

come up.

No! This is so gross!

The girl nearly fainted when she realized she'd just swallowed that nasty insect. But more pressingly, a searing heat began surging through her. Her fingers started to spasm. She was unable to control them. Her vision grew narrower by the second. Unable to stand any longer, she sank to her knees. The world began to spin wildly. A bestial growl rumbled in her lungs.

"Hey! What's wrong?"

The last thing she heard was her sister's concerned voice.

Help me...

She tried to cry out with all her might, but whether or not those words reached her sister... She would never know.

Something pitch black was growing inside her. It consumed her, and her whole world was plunged into darkness.



Chapter 2

KIKAN

—Return—

1

A strange, cold sensation on Hiroshi's face roused him. Lifting his head and stroking his right cheek, he felt chilled water on his fingers. He readjusted his muffler and exhaled a great puff of white mist. Yesterday's snowfall had partially melted and had turned to ice at his feet. Apparently he'd been using it as a pillow.

Hiroshi looked around. The scenery was perfectly familiar. He was in the school's courtyard, almost in the dead center of it. Four of his classmates lay around him. Before Hiroshi could call out to them, Takuro stirred.

"...School? What's going on?" he wondered aloud, stretching his back and shoulders. "We were just in the hills behind school, right?"

"Yes. We were, but..."

Hiroshi looked up to the giant clock face atop the school building.

6:23.

Judging from the first rays of sunlight starting to pierce the eastern sky, it had to be morning.

Hiroshi recalled being trapped in the Jailhouse with everyone. By working together, they were able to escape via a tunnel that took them up and out through a well to the outside world. And just as they were celebrating their exodus, who should appear but Naoki—their classmate who died in a traffic accident last year.

"I got myself a body, so now I can finally have my true vengeance."

Just remembering the look of ecstasy on Naoki's face as he said those words made Hiroshi's skin crawl.

"You should all probably start running now. I'm still not used to this form. I can't control it as well as you guys. I might just kill you instantly."

In the midst of threatening them, Naoki had started to change. His body expanded and his skin darkened, growing larger and bluer by the second.

“Now... Let’s play our final round of tag, shall we?”

The moment they’d heard those words, a blue light had enveloped them.

“That’s the last thing I remember. When I woke up, I was here. What in the world happened?” Takuro asked while shaking their three still-unconscious classmates.

Luckily, everyone woke up immediately. No one appeared to be hurt. Hiroshi breathed a sigh of relief—short-lived though it was.

“Where’s Shun?” Anna nearly shouted.

And it was a good question. Shun was nowhere to be seen.

“What happened? You’ve probably figured everything out by now, haven’t you, brainiac?” Takeshi asked, scratching his head.

However, Hiroshi had no answer for him. There was too little information available to make an educated guess.

“Maybe this is a clue, but... I saw God glowing,” Mika said, her face taut with nerves.

All eyes focused on her. She was cradling a small, blocky monster in her arms like a baby.

“God? What are you talking about?” Hiroshi asked.

“You’ve seen it too, haven’t you?” Takuro asked in turn. “That monster there was a statue of in the annex chapel.”

Now that he mentioned it, Hiroshi did recall seeing odd decorations there.

“When the annex burned down, I brought it outside,” Takeshi chimed in.

Apparently the blue monsters of the Jailhouse worshiped this strange statue as “God.”

“But it’s merely an idol, correct? What do you mean when you say you saw it glow?”

“I don’t know what it means... but I saw it. That statue must have led us here,” Mika said, stroking the head of the monster in her arms—Fwuffy.

Hiroshi put a hand to his chin.

“We escaped from the Jailhouse just as the sun was starting to rise. At this time of year, that would be about 6:10 AM. And presently, it’s 6:20 AM,” said Hiroshi, gesturing toward the school clock. “That means it’s been less than ten minutes since we lost consciousness in the hills.”

“There’s no way you can get from all the way over there to here in ten minutes!” Takeshi immediately objected.

Hiroshi’s expression soured.

“I understand that. I mean to suggest this occurrence defies all logic.”

“Maybe the clock is off?”

“Judging from the sun’s position, it is most likely accurate,” Hiroshi answered instantly. “I can’t entirely refute the possibility that an entire day has elapsed since we lost consciousness, but since none of us seem to be suffering from exposure, I doubt that’s the case.”

“In other words, what? We were teleported here?”

Hiroshi recoiled slightly at Takeshi’s ridiculous suggestion. It was so unscientific that he would rather not even humor the theory, but the truth was that nothing else seemed to explain what had happened.

“What does it matter? We need to find Shun!” Anna said heatedly.

To Hiroshi, a solid understanding of their situation would be key to figuring out where Shun was, but trying to explain that to Anna right now would only agitate her. As such, Hiroshi chose to keep quiet and do things her way for now.

The largest obstacle in searching for Shun right now was that they had no idea where to start. That being the case, the most logical plan of action seemed to be going back to where Shun was last seen—the hills behind the school—to look for signs of him. But before Hiroshi could even open his mouth to suggest that...

“Shun’s right here,” a voice said from overhead.

Everyone looked up to see two figures atop the school roof. One was Shun. His arms were pinned behind him by the second figure: Naoki.

Anna took off straight for the school building.

“Wait a second!”

Kicking off the frozen ground, Hiroshi followed right after her. Anna stopped before the stone monument that stood next to the morning assembly dais. It had been erected to celebrate the founding of their middle school. On the surface of the stone, emblazoned with the school’s emblem, was the founding date of March 2nd, 2005.

Hiroshi placed a hand on the statue and looked straight up. Naoki and Shun were standing just inside the railing that encircled the roof. Naoki, who had transformed into a giant monster the last time they saw him, was now back to his normal form.

“Naoki, please calm down!” Hiroshi shouted as loud as he could to make sure they could hear him, while delivering his statement with all the calm he could muster.

The railing on the roof was only waist high. If Naoki felt like it, it wouldn’t take much to push Shun over. They couldn’t provoke him.

“Oh, I *am* calm! You’re the ones who seem agitated,” Naoki sneered with a silent laugh.

Despite the distance, the morning sun illuminated the expression on his face quite clearly.

“Welcome to the Jailhouse,” he said, the corners of his lips curling upward. He wasn’t shouting, yet Hiroshi had no trouble hearing him.

“The Jailhouse? What’re you saying? This is the school,” Anna questioned.

“To you, maybe. But to me, it was no more than a prison. It was the same for you, wasn’t it, Shun?”

Shun, his face twisted in pain from having both his arms restrained, said nothing.

“Stop it! Let go of Shun!” Anna screamed.

Naoki chuckled.

“No need to worry. Shun’s the only one I have no intention of hurting.”

Only Shun?

Naoki’s choice of words got Hiroshi’s attention, and he raised an eyebrow.

“My wish has finally come true. Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for this moment?”

In stark contrast to the strained tension across Hiroshi and the others, Naoki’s voice was bursting with joy.

“Now, let’s begin the game!” Leaning over the railing, Naoki began rocking back and forth in excitement. “I will punish all of those who made me suffer!”

“Screw you!” Takuro shouted angrily from Hiroshi’s side.

“Ugh, you’re so annoying,” Naoki groaned, continuing to rock furiously. “Your yelling really grates my nerves, Takuro. As punishment, I’ll personally throw you into despair the likes of which you’ve never known.”

Naoki may have only looked like a scrawny kid, but his body was truly that of a powerful monster. The railing began to creak loudly as it warped underneath him.

“Everyone is going to die because of *you*. And once I’ve burned their horrible deaths into the back of your eyelids, you’ll join them.”

A section of the railing suddenly snapped clean off with a weak sound. For a second, Naoki’s body pitched dangerously forward. One of his arms remained wrapped around Shun’s neck.

Anna and Mika shrieked, and Hiroshi could hear Takuro catch his breath next to him. But in an impressive display of agility, Naoki caught himself and stepped back to safety. Then, with a flippant wave of his hand, he dragged Shun away and disappeared from sight.

“Damn him!”

An infuriated Takuro dashed toward the building. He tried to open the glass

sliding door, but it was locked and wouldn't budge.

Hiroshi stepped back and looked up at the clock.

6:30 AM.

In an hour, students would begin to arrive on campus. There was no doubt in his mind that Naoki was planning on killing all of their classmates when they showed up. They needed to find a solution before then.

Hiroshi took a deep breath and felt a tightening pain in his chest. It was only then that he realized how uncharacteristically tense he'd been.



Chapter 3

KIDOU

—Launch—

1

They needed to find Naoki within the next hour to put a stop to his twisted plans for vengeance—Hiroshi knew with absolute certainty there would be no other way. Everyone else seemed to know it within their heart of hearts, too. Just by silently looking at each other, it was clear they were in agreement.

They all then hurried toward the entrance. The first order of business would be figuring out a way to get inside the school, but the front door was locked.

“With my strength, it’ll be easy to break through—”

“Hold on a second, please,” Hiroshi quickly stopped Takuro as he wound a fist back to smash through the sliding glass door. “If we force our way in, it will trigger a silent alarm and alert the security company. And if we told them there was some kind of monster in there, we’d simply be evacuated and forced to watch as police went in to clear the building... In other words, we’d be sitting idly, powerlessly by as the body count rose needlessly.”

“Then what do we do? Is there another way to—”

“The boys’ bathroom on the first floor,” Takeshi interjected.

“What?” Takuro asked, irritated at being cut off.

“The lock on the window in the boys’ bathroom is broken. We can crack that sucker wide open and slip right in anytime we want.”

“How do you know that?”

“Heh, that’s how I always sneak in when I forget something at school,” Takeshi responded, puffing out his chest with pride.

Apparently, he didn’t realize that wasn’t exactly something he should be bragging about.

“I’ll run around back, get in through the window, then unlock the front door from the inside. Just give me a second!”

He was off before he even finished talking. The bathroom window he’d mentioned was fairly high up and rather small. Hiroshi or Takuro might have

been able to squeeze through after some struggling, but the small and nimble Takeshi was a much better choice for the job. The others just had to count on him for the time being.

A bitter northerly wind began to blow as they stood there waiting outside the front door to the school. It was spectacularly cold this morning, even for the season. Even with his coat on and his scarf tightly wrapped around his neck, Hiroshi could still feel the winter cold seeping into his bones. His fingers had already gone almost completely numb.

How is everyone else managing?

He glanced around, but none of them seemed to be bothered in the slightest. In fact, Hiroshi was the only one whose breath was condensing white. It was odd. Their appearances and personalities weren't any different, so it was easy to forget, but this was a stark reminder for Hiroshi that his friends had changed. He was now the only one among them that wasn't a monster inside. And when that realization settled upon his heart, he felt his chest tighten painfully.

Takeshi was gone less than a minute. Before the others knew it, he was waving to them from the other side of the glass door. He hurriedly unlocked it and beckoned them inside. Something suddenly zoomed by Hiroshi at an incredible speed. Takuro, who was in front of him, jerked back slightly. Hiroshi had assumed that Fwuffy had escaped Mika's arms, but when he looked, she was still holding it. Hiroshi then glanced back to see a small, black avian circle Takeshi, wings outstretched, as it scanned its surroundings.

It appeared to be a swallow. Its white underbody and unsplit tail would indicate it was a common house martin, but it also looked small enough to be a house swift. Hiroshi wasn't sure, but he could vaguely recall someone talking about a swallow's nest in the eaves of the gym storehouse.

Swallows were ordinarily migratory birds, fleeing south of Japan in search of more temperate climates to call home for the winter. Thanks to global warming, however, Hiroshi had read that some of them were learning they could simply stay put for the season. The recent and extreme cold spell was likely making it much harder for those that had chosen to stay behind to find bugs to eat. Perhaps this particular specimen was making a brave attempt to

find food in the school building, protected from the elements.

But either way, swallows were a rare sight in winter. Hiroshi took a step forward, hoping to get a closer look, but this seemed to put the bird on alert. It quickly flapped its wings and disappeared down the dark hallway. He watched it go, wondering if it would be able to find anything to eat. His thoughts were interrupted, however, when someone suddenly grabbed his right wrist.

“Hey, now’s not the time for birdwatching, man.”

He turned to find Takuro giving him a dirty look.

“Sorry. You’re right.”

He was, of course. Hiroshi apologized quickly. The swallow would simply have to wait. They had enough on their hands as it was, and they didn’t have much time. They’d somehow have to figure out a way to stop Naoki before their classmates began arriving at school.

“Mika, Anna, you two stay here,” Takuro said, his expression still steely.

“Huh? Why?” Mika pouted. “I want to go with you.”

Mika placed her hands on Takuro’s chest, but he coldly pushed her away.

“Idiot. What if one of our classmates shows up while we’re searching the school?”

Mika seemed to pick up on how serious he was straight away and offered no more resistance.

“So don’t let anyone in until we get back, and I mean anyone. Not our classmates, not any of the other students, and not even the teachers.”

“Not even the teachers?”

“That’s right. Naoki can’t control his monster form like we can yet. He’d probably eat anyone who happened to run into him.”

“But no one would ever believe us if we told them the truth about what’s going on. What are we supposed to do?”

“Don’t worry,” Anna cut in. “If we say we saw someone suspicious sneak into the building with a knife, it should keep people out. Even the teachers would

believe something like that coming from me.”

“Of course, little miss perfect. The teachers are all fooled by your little act, aren’t they? Same as everyone else,” jeered Mika, her voice rife with malice.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” retorted a cool and composed Anna. “But you’re better at playing the damsel in distress, aren’t you?”

“What? You looking to get slapped again?”

“You can try it. Shall we pick up where we left off?”

The girls were heatedly locking horns on the surface, but secretly seemed to be enjoying their little spat. Hiroshi assumed it would probably be fine to leave them be.

“Then shall we go look for Naoki and Shun?” Hiroshi asked, turning to Takuro and Takeshi.

He then made his way over to his shoe locker and changed into his indoor shoes. He figured navigating the school would be a little easier if he were in shoes he was used to wearing around the building rather than his loafers. Takuro and Takeshi seemed to share the same idea, and went over to their own lockers to change footwear as well. Hiroshi then proceeded a few steps down the hallway before stopping and turning around.

“Anna, Mika,” he called to the girls. “Please leave the building now.”

“What? Why?” Anna questioned, cocking her head quizzically.

“The wind’s blowing outside, and it’s cold. Can’t we just wait here?” Mika begged.

But Hiroshi shook his head.

“Why not?” Mika inquired with a slightly sharper tone.

“Naoki called this place the Jailhouse.” Pushing up his glasses frames, Hiroshi concisely explained his worries. “Do you recall what happened when we entered the Jailhouse before? The front door locked behind us. We couldn’t open it, even with the key. Something similar may happen here.”

Someone gulped audibly. Takeshi was staring at Hiroshi, a look of fear

plastered on his face.

“If we all get locked inside the building, our strategies will be limited. As long as we don’t know what Naoki is up to, it’s dangerous to put all our eggs in one basket, so to speak. So, as insurance, I would like you two to wait outside.”

“And if all the doors close and we can’t get inside after you, what then?” Mika asked worriedly.

“Then call the police,” Hiroshi replied without hesitation. “I highly doubt the monster is immune to bullets.”

“You’re gonna kill Naoki?” Takeshi asked incredulously. His eyes were wide in an expression of pure shock.

“That thing isn’t Naoki. It’s—”

It’s a monster with Naoki’s form and memories.

Hiroshi stopped himself before he could finish the sentence. Eight eyes—four pairs of unnaturally dilated pupils were staring straight at him. Right now, Anna, Mika, Takuro, and Takeshi were looking more like Naoki’s brethren than Hiroshi’s friends.

Of course, Hiroshi knew they wouldn’t betray him. But he still understood they would have mixed feelings about him talking about and treating Naoki like a monster.

“...All right,” Anna capitulated, seemingly able to read the silent Hiroshi’s mind. “If that will keep everyone alive, then it’s what we have to do.”

That’s what she said, but it sounded like she was trying to convince herself, too. She may not have totally accepted it, but she realized there was no time for discussion.

“Thank you.”

Trusting Anna, Hiroshi could only bow his head in thanks.

2

Leaving Anna and Mika outside, Hiroshi proceeded down the hallway with

Takuro and Takeshi. Their destination was their classroom on the east end of the second floor.

The empty school was so eerily quiet that Hiroshi could swear he heard the sound of his own heart beating. He'd walked this hall a hundred times before, but now it felt like he'd wandered into an alternate dimension. This wasn't necessarily wrong, either. He reflexively shivered a little at the thought of what lay ahead.

"Hey..."

As they were ascending the stairs, Takeshi—who was following Takuro but was ahead of Hiroshi—suddenly stopped.

"Is there some way to save our classmates beside killing Naoki?" he asked, turning to Hiroshi with imploring eyes.

"We can only hope he listens to reason..."

Hiroshi stopped himself there. Honestly, he doubted things would go that easily. It was painfully obvious that Naoki's grudge had gone well past the point of reason.

"He was a good kid. He was always nice to everyone... If we can just talk it out, I'm sure we can come to some kind of understanding."

"I'll handle it," Takuro said in a low, serious voice as he leaned over the second floor railing from above. He hadn't stopped moving. "I'm the reason he's doing all this, so I'm the one who has to settle things. You guys don't have to worry."

"Settle things, Takuro? What are you planning?" Takeshi asked, his expression stiff.

Takuro's only reply was a small shake of his head.

"C'mon, let's hurry. You guys waste too much time talking."

He dodged the question entirely. Hiroshi imagined nothing would come from hounding him for an answer, either.

"Let's go."

He gave Takeshi a pat on the shoulder to urge him forward. Wearily, Takeshi began ascending the stairs again, and Hiroshi followed after him.

Their classroom was the closest one to the stairwell, and they peered in through the window when they reached it. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. They called for Shun, but no one answered.

Takuro then tried the door. It was unsurprisingly locked, but the door itself was unremarkable. One roundhouse kick from Takuro was all it took to send it flying off its hinges. Trampling over the door, they piled into the room. It appeared to be empty. They even checked under the teacher's desk and in the supply closet, but there was no one there.

"Looks like we have the wrong place." Takuro clicked his tongue. "Guess we have to search every damn inch of the school now."

"Are you going to break down every door? I can't say that's the smartest plan, but perhaps it can't be—" Hiroshi abruptly cut himself off.

Straining his ears, he could hear a door opening and closing elsewhere in the building.

"The first floor..." Takeshi whispered.

"Yeah, probably the teacher's lounge..." Takuro nodded.

Hiroshi had heard the sound, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from. Apparently the other two boys now had superhuman hearing in addition to everything else.

"It's gotta be Naoki. Let's move." Takuro was out of the classroom before anyone could even object.

"W-Wait up!" Takeshi hurriedly scrambled after him.

Hiroshi followed suit, but something tugged on his memories as he stepped out into the hall. He stopped to look back into the classroom, and his thoughts drifted back to a few short weeks ago.

He'd just borrowed the latest insect encyclopedia from the library and was poring over it. Takuro and Takeshi were goofing off in the back of the classroom. Mika was watching the two of them, wondering if they'd ever grow

up. Shun and Anna were sitting across from each other at his desk, chatting happily. None of them could have ever imagined the hell they were about to go through.

Can we... go back to those days?

There was no way of knowing.

3

Shun fell splayed out on the floor when Naoki shoved him by the chest. He hit his back hard, which knocked the wind out of him for a good moment.

“You’re so dramatic. I barely touched you.”

Naoki tilted his head back and laughed. He still couldn’t control his new body very well. Slowly approaching the coughing Shun, he pulled an aged power cord from his pocket.

“Sorry if this hurts,” he apologized as he began winding it around Shun’s hands and feet.

Shun could only helplessly watch as he was tied up. Resistance was futile, and he knew all too well what awaited him if he angered Naoki and summoned the monster within him. For now, his best plan was to be as obedient as possible and avoid doing anything to make Naoki mad while he waited for his chance to escape.

Naoki pulled the cord tight around his wrists. The pain triggered something instinctual in him, and despite trying to suppress the urge, his body reflexively bucked. His right leg landed square in Naoki’s gut, knocking him backward onto his butt. It seemed Shun had caught him quite off guard.

A small wooden box tumbled out of Naoki’s pocket. It was blue and covered in complex scribbles in odd characters on one side. Instinct told Shun that something terrible was sealed inside. He shuddered at the thought, but Naoki had no such reaction to it. He didn’t even seem to know what it was.

“What’s this? What’s it doing in my pocket?”

He scooped it up and tossed it unceremoniously into the corner of the room.

The top was knocked loose when it landed, spilling the contents of the box all over the floor. Shun could hear it, but was too far away to tell what it actually was. Some of whatever it was rolled all the way into the hallway through the open door.

“Now, it’s about time we got this game started.”

Not paying any mind to the mess he’d just made, Naoki stood up and brushed the dirt off his uniform.

“Game? What are you planning on doing?”

“I’m going to turn this place into the Jailhouse,” Naoki replied instantly, a gloating look on his face as if pleased someone had asked.

“You can’t possibly do that...”

“Oh, believe me, I can. You shouldn’t underestimate me.” He licked his dry lips and cracked a creepy smile before continuing. “Have you ever wondered why the mansion in your escape game and the Jailhouse had exactly the same layout? How the monsters appeared in reality exactly as you envisioned them?”

“How would I know—”

“It’s because I showed you everything about the mansion and the monsters in your dreams, down to the very last detail,” Naoki said, leaning in over the supine Shun.

“...In my dreams?”

Shun was in shock. His brain was having trouble just processing the words that had come out of Naoki’s mouth.

“After being murdered by Takuro and becoming a spirit, I gained a strange power. I can now control the dreams of others.”

“No, it can’t be... That’s not possible...”

“Think back, Shun. The mansion and monsters in the game you first made were totally different from their current incarnations, right? You only changed them into what they are now after moving here. Why do you think that is?”

“I...”

The locked drawer that had been rattling in the back of Shun's mind all this time suddenly flew open. Naoki was right. He had seen it all in a dream: Takuro and the gang, locked in the feared Jailhouse and getting picked off by a giant, blue monster one by one. Shun even remembered the sense of relief he'd felt seeing Takuro scream and die in agony in his dream. Programming was his only solace, and in an effort to vent some of the stress he was combating over being bullied on a daily basis, he'd named the characters in his game after Takuro and his friends.

"I didn't expect your game and reality to sync up like that, honestly. But what serendipity! Just look at all the fun I'm having! Thank you. Really, this is all thanks to you."

Naoki then knelt down next to Shun.

"It was too easy to lure the idiots who bullied me to the Jailhouse with my power to control dreams."

"Why... Why would you do that?"

"What are you talking about? It was all part of the script you wrote. You can't tell me you didn't enjoy seeing everyone die. You did, didn't you?"

"No... I..."

Shun was lost for words. Had he...? He'd lost count of how many times he'd wished Takuro was dead. Sometimes while watching him be torn apart in-game during alpha testing, he found himself hoping something similar would happen in real life. That much... That much was true. He understood Naoki's pent-up frustrations all too well, and Naoki must have picked up on that.

"I knew you'd understand."

Naoki leaned in more, bringing his face closer to Shun's. He could smell his breath, sweet like custard.

"I could have lured Takuro's gang to the Jailhouse all on my own, but I wanted to do it with you. That's why I gave you some inspiration for the game. I wanted them to experience hell wrought by the hands of the two people they'd tormented."

“Sorry,” Shun said, turning his face away from Naoki’s. “I might’ve helped you a month ago, but things are different now. After personally experiencing so many facets of death in the Jailhouse, Takuro and I have both changed. We’re friends now—”

“Ridiculous.”

Naoki abruptly stood up. Shun was worried he was angry, but there was a slight smile lingering on his lips.

“People don’t change so easily. You’ve been tricked, you poor, naive fool.”

Naoki looked down upon Shun with pity in his eyes.

“Well, no matter. Just promise you’ll let me know if you have a change of heart and feel like helping after all, okay? I’ll untie you as soon as you do.”

And with that, Naoki turned his back on Shun and began walking away.

“Where are you going?” Shun asked.

“The next room. Don’t worry. I’ll be right back,” Naoki said as he opened a door further into the room. “See you then.”

He waved his right hand before disappearing into the adjacent room. Now alone, Shun struggled for a bit to try and break free of his bindings, but the cord was too tough and tied too tightly. The more he moved, the more it dug into his skin. It got so that the slightest movement made his raw wrists feel like they were on fire.

It’s no use. I’m not getting out of these any time soon.

Giving up, Shun looked about the room.

Where am I, even?

Naoki had pulled his hood down over his eyes when he brought him here, so he couldn’t say for certain, but he was pretty sure they’d only gone down one flight of stairs. That should put them on the third floor, but he didn’t recognize this room. It was small, and it certainly wasn’t a classroom. That much was obvious from the lack of desks and chairs. The only notable furnishing in the room was a standing ashtray in the corner. Sniffing, Shun realized he could smell the lingering stench of tobacco.

Half of the eastern wing on the third floor was meeting rooms and supply rooms. The area was generally off-limits to students, and it seemed like this was some sort of smoking closet for the employees. Smoking was forbidden on campus, so this must be where the faculty would sneak off to when they were desperate for a smoke break.

Okay... Now what do I do?

Crawling like a caterpillar, Shun could slowly wiggle across the floor. The door seemed like a long way away, but it was wide open.

Could he escape that way? No, he'd be helpless once he got out into the hall. It would be next to impossible to get down the stairs with his hands and feet bound. Knowing that must have been why Naoki was brazen enough to leave the door open in the first place.

What about the window, then? Shun looked up through it. Pure blue sky spread out before his eyes. He couldn't be sure of the time without a clock, but if it was that light out already, it must be about 6:30. It would only be another hour before kids started showing up at school. There might even be some teachers who would show up even sooner.

With Naoki out of the room, now was his chance. Shun knew it wouldn't be safe to jump out of a third-floor window, but he could at least yell for help. Straining his ears, he desperately listened for sounds coming from the adjoining room and heard something like typing on a keyboard.

What is he doing?

Unease gripped at his chest, but as long as he could hear typing, that meant Naoki was busy. Shun scrunched himself up and wriggled his way across the floor, careful not to make a sound. It was difficult at first. He even went backward instead of forward by accident, but eventually got the hang of it. His elbows and knees began to sting after scraping along the floor, but he couldn't let that stop him. Shun crawled for his life toward the window.

When he was only a few centimeters from it, the sharp trill of a bird came from the hall. He turned to see a swallow resting its wings at the door. It eyed a small, blue bug lying on the floor before gobbling it down. Was that what had rolled out of the box Naoki threw? The swallow suddenly stopped eating, as if

disgusted by the food, and flew off.

Not good.

Wiping away the sweat dripping down his temple with his shoulder, Shun turned back to the window. Now wasn't the time for birdwatching. He needed to be focused on what was outside. Sitting up and leaning his back against the wall, he slowly started to slide himself up into a standing position.

Just then, the typing in the adjoining room stopped. The next moment, the scenery before him changed. An iron wall suddenly sprung up and blocked out the morning light. Confused, Shun whipped around when he heard a door open. The lights in the room then came on. Shun had started to panic, thinking he'd been teleported somewhere again, but was surprised to see he was still in the room that stank of cigarettes.

"Welcome to the Jailhouse."

Naoki, his hand on the light switch, was smiling.

"I installed your game on the school's mainframe. Now all the exits have been locked and the windows are covered with metal plates. No one's going to be escaping," he said, waving a familiar CD-ROM. "Honestly, I wasn't sure if I could turn the school into the Jailhouse at first, but it looks like everything worked out. Thankfully, fortune just keeps smiling on me."

Linking his hands behind his back, Naoki spoke cheerfully, almost singsong-like.

"Now, are you ready to help me punish everyone?"

Shun adamantly shook his head.

"I see... That's a shame, but oh well. You'll still tell me if you change your mind, right? I'll always be happy to have you on my side." He bent down and patted Shun on the shoulder. "For now, think long and hard about it. I'm off to enjoy the first game."

There, Naoki made to leave.

"Oh," he said, stopping at the door. "I can't have you running off on me, so I'm locking this."

He then used a master key to lock the door behind him. Shun caught one last glimpse of the hallway, and what Naoki had said was true. The windows were all plated shut.

I'm completely trapped now...

Caught between shock and horror, Shun curled up on the spot. He could hear the trill of a bird in the distance. It was probably the swallow from earlier, but the cadence was different this time. Its cry sounded more like a deep, monstrous howl.



Chapter 4

KIBEN

—Sophistry—

1

They approached the teacher's lounge, careful not to make a sound, and peered in through the window. From the outside, the sight of three students sneakily peeking into the teacher's lounge was quite comical. But there was nothing funny here. They were looking for signs of Naoki, and unfortunately, the lounge appeared to be as empty as the classroom had been.

"Was the sound we heard really here at the teacher's lounge?" Hiroshi asked, glancing over at Takuro.

"What? You don't believe me? It was totally here. Right, Takeshi?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure I heard it coming from about here..."

Unlike the confident Takuro, Takeshi seemed rather unsure. Hiroshi had no idea who was right or just how enhanced their hearing really was. But the moment he shifted his gaze back to take a second look into the lounge...

"What are you three doing here so early in the morning?" a husky voice asked from behind them as someone put their hands on the boys' shoulders.

"Waugh!"

Takeshi shrieked and nearly jumped out of his skin. Takuro's face went stiff. Even the stoic Hiroshi, after being touched on the shoulder without warning, was quite shocked.

"Oh, Mr. Inoue. Good morning." Hiroshi turned and greeted his teacher politely, as he always did.

"Oh, it's just you, Panzee? Don't scare me like that," Takeshi said acidly from the hall floor. It seemed he couldn't yet stand on his still-knocking knees.

Inoue Noritsugi was their homeroom teacher. He was still in his twenties, making him the youngest teacher at the school. But thanks to his perpetually messy hair, hunched posture, and the lab coat he always wore, he seemed far beyond his years. Some students had even taken to calling him "Panzee" because he looked rather like a chimpanzee when he walked.

“You’re here early,” Hiroshi remarked.

“I’m a teacher. I always get to school early.”

“Your sleeve is wet. What happened?” Hiroshi asked, pointing at the stained arm of his otherwise white coat.

“Sharp as ever, I see. I forgot to put water in my amoeba tank last night. I got worried that they might be all dried up, so I was in a hurry refilling it when I got here.”

Mr. Inoue was also the advisor for the biology club. They raised a wide variety of animals, including hamsters and tropical fish. The amoebas must be one of their projects.

“Were they okay?” Hiroshi asked, concerned. He secretly quite enjoyed observing the various creatures in the science lab.

“Yes, no need to worry. They’re all doing just fine.”

Hiroshi breathed a sigh of relief to hear the good news.

“More importantly, you kids... How’d you get in here? The entrance should have been locked.”

“I snuck in through the bathroom window—ow!”

“What do you mean? The door was just open, man,” Takuro fibbed after discretely smacking the stupidly honest Takeshi on the back of his head.

“Ah, I see. Another teacher must be here already, then.”

Mr. Inoue didn’t even pause to consider doubting a star student like Takuro.

“Still, I must say, this is a curious combo. What’s got you boys at school so early?” Mr. Inoue asked, looking from Hiroshi to Takuro and back.

“Well...”

Unsure of what to say, Takuro’s gaze shifted to Hiroshi. “Back me up here,” his wide eyes pleaded.

“Mr. Inoue, we happened upon a rare bird in the courtyard.”

There was no time to think too deeply about an answer. He used the first

thing that came to mind, which just so happened to be out-of-season swallow he'd spotted earlier.

"A bird? What kind of bird?" Mr. Inoue asked, seemingly intrigued.

They hadn't answered his question at all, but it seemed they'd succeeded in distracting him. Since Mr. Inoue was the biology club advisor, Hiroshi was hoping that the mention of a rare species would capture his attention. And so far, it seemed to be working.

"I'm afraid I'm uncertain... but it might still be in the courtyard. Would you come with me?"

"Oh, sure. Just give me a minute. I'll get my coat."

Mr. Inoue was already halfway through the door to the teacher's lounge before he finished answering.

"Hey," Takuro whispered in Hiroshi's ear. "What're you thinking, taking Panzee outside?"

"Mr. Inoue is our homeroom teacher. It's very likely Naoki has a grudge against him too. If we don't do anything, he could end up a victim," Hiroshi quickly explained. "For the moment, let's get him outside and—"

Before he could finish, the world was suddenly plunged into darkness.

Hiroshi didn't immediately understand what had happened right away. He was momentarily worried he'd gone blind, but when he heard Takeshi screaming, he knew—whatever had happened—that it wasn't just him.

"Hey, what's the meaning of this?"

A dim light appeared from inside the teacher's lounge. It seemed Mr. Inoue had known where a flashlight would be.

"A blackout?" a confused and scared Takeshi asked.

No, that couldn't be it. The sun was already up. Unless it had suddenly been extinguished or the windows were covered, there was no reason for it to be this dark. Wait...

"...The windows?"

Hiroshi reached out for the glass panels that should reveal a vista of the courtyard outside. It was just as he feared. Even in the dark, he could tell that the window had been shuttered with a solid panel... Just like in the Jailhouse.

Not good. If this is Naoki's work...

"Mr. Inoue, we have to hurry."

Hiroshi grabbed Mr. Inoue, who was looking rather bewildered as he exited the teacher's lounge, by the arm and began to run. The flashlight only illuminated a few meters in front of them, but Hiroshi knew the path to the front entrance well enough that he could have navigated it completely blind.

"I'll go scout ahead," Takuro offered as he took the lead.

He was running at full speed in the darkness. Hiroshi could only assume his vision had been enhanced in a similar fashion to his hearing. And with Takuro guiding the way, the group quickly made it to the entrance. As Hiroshi had feared, however, it too was shuttered closed.

"It's no use. This thing won't budge." Bathed in the light of the flashlight, Takuro sighed. "We're completely trapped in here."

"But that means no one else can get in now, right?" Takeshi, the lone straggler of the group, cocked his head quizzically at his own question. "Doesn't that seem weird? Naoki brought us here because he wanted vengeance on our whole class... Right?"

He had a point. What was Naoki really planning? His true intentions were still shrouded in mystery. Black clouds of doubt swirled in Hiroshi's chest. His sense of foreboding was growing by the second.

Krrrk...

The raised plastic flooring in front of the shoe lockers creaked ever so slightly. Mr. Inoue pointed the flashlight toward the source of the noise. A deep voice slipped from the depths of his throat.

"Oh, my..."

For from the darkness appeared Naoki.

For a brief moment, no one said anything. Mr. Inoue simply stared at Naoki, blinking repeatedly. He was probably having trouble believing his own eyes.

“Long time no see, Mr. Inoue.”

Naoki was the first to break the silence, and he giggled when Mr. Inoue found himself unable to respond.

“Why the dumb face? Cat got your tongue? Or did you forget about me?”

“...Who are you?” Mr. Inoue finally managed to eke out in a raspy voice.

“Ah, you did forget me. I’m hurt. It’s me, Naoki. Ohashi Naoki.”

“Don’t lie to me. That can’t be... You... Naoki’s dead. There was an accident at the end of last year...”

Mr. Inoue’s voice was quivering. Hiroshi had to wonder why. He could understand a reasonable amount of shock upon suddenly encountering a student he believed to be dead, but with the way he was acting... Were they related or something? Mr. Inoue was beyond frightened. It was almost as if his fear was tinged with something else. Guilt, perhaps?

“No, that was no accident. I was murdered. By Mr. Star Student Takuro right there, no less.”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s just as you say,” Takuro cut in. “So if you’re going to hate someone, hate me. Panzee’s got nothing to do with this.”

“Are you stupid, Takuro? He knew the whole time. That I was bullied. That you’re a fake. Everything.” Pointing at Mr. Inoue, Naoki’s tone intensified. “He saw it all and pretended to be totally blind.”

“Th-That’s baseless conjecture,” Mr. Inoue said, shaking his head from side to side. “I had no idea. My students are all important to me. If I’d known, I surely would’ve tried to help you.”

“Don’t you lie to me!” Naoki’s whimsical smile suddenly became a sharp grimace, and his voice turned low and dark. “How many times did I come to you for help? But you always said the same thing. ‘Is that really bullying? It sounds

more like friendly roughhousing to me. If you don't like it, then why don't you just say so? It's not that big of a deal.' I knew it was pointless, but I still came crawling to you every time, desperate for help. You were the only one I could rely on. And yet... And yet, you..."

Naoki's right eye suddenly bulged with a gross popping sound. Mr. Inoue's mouth fell agape in a silent scream. Blisters appeared on Naoki's face, growing and merging until they became one giant lump. His skin darkened and turned blue. And finally, a savage, inhuman howl echoed through the front hall.

Naoki's horribly distorted eyes fixated on Mr. Inoue like a falcon zeroing in on its prey. And Mr. Inoue was no better than a defenseless mouse. Hiroshi spread his arms to try and protect him, when...

"Stop!"

It seemed Takuro had sensed Naoki's bloodlust as well, and he wasted no time jumping at him. However, with Naoki nearly in full monster form, it wasn't much of a fight.

"Out of my way!"

Naoki brushed Takuro off easily with his left arm, sending him flying through the air and into the far wall. Hiroshi could feel the room shake from the unimaginable impact.

"Ahhhhh!"

Witnessing Naoki's display of inhuman strength must have snapped Mr. Inoue out of his stupor. He immediately took off screaming.

"Wait, Mr. Inoue!"

Hiroshi tried to go after him, but Mr. Inoue had taken the flashlight with him. Darkness immediately closed in, obscuring everything outside of arm's reach.

"Help! Someone help!"

Shouting was only going to make it easier for Naoki to find him, but Mr. Inoue kept screaming as he disappeared down the hallway. Eventually, his voice faded into the distance.

"Ugh..."

Once everything else was quiet, Hiroshi heard Takuro groaning in the darkness.

“Takuro, get up!” Takeshi’s panicked voice quickly followed.

Without a light, it was impossible to tell what was going on. Hiroshi put his hand against the wall and used it as a guide to find his way over to where his friends’ voices were coming from. It was an ugly situation to be in. They’d be utterly helpless if Naoki circled back around for them.

Feeling his way along the wall, however, Hiroshi felt something sticking out. He traced its shape with his fingertips. It had to be a light switch. Elated, he flipped it. And to his pleasant surprise, the overhead lights flickered to life.

Hiroshi’s first priority was then checking to see if Naoki was still in the room, but he was nowhere to be seen. He suspected he’d gone after Mr. Inoue. His second priority was Takuro, who was collapsed over by the entrance. He was currently lying on his back, unmoving.

“What do we do? Takuro’s not responding to anything,” Takeshi said from his side, nearly in tears.

Hiroshi jogged straight over to them. Thankfully, Takuro was still breathing and his pulse was normal. He wasn’t obviously hurt, either.

“He may have a light concussion from hitting his head,” Hiroshi postulated.

“What do we do?” asked a concerned Takeshi.

“If there’s no damage to his spine, it should be perfectly fine to carry him to the nurse’s office.”

Fortunately, that was just around the corner from the front door. Hiroshi went on a quick expedition back to the teacher’s lounge, snatched the key from the rack on the wall, and returned to unlock the nurse’s office. Then he helped Takeshi carry Takuro inside and glanced up at the clock on the wall.

6:45 AM.

It hadn’t even been 15 minutes since they’d first infiltrated the school, yet his mind and body were already exhausted. But when he stopped to think about it, that made perfect sense. He hadn’t slept a wink since the night before. And it

certainly didn't seem like he would be getting any sleep anytime soon. Where was Shun? Was Takuro all right? And Mr. Inoue... His worries were only increasing as the minutes passed.

"Now, let's begin the game!"

Naoki's declaration from the rooftop rattled around in Hiroshi's brain. If this was a game, that would imply there were rules and a predetermined way to decide the winners and losers. But they'd been given no such stipulations. Not even instructions. How were they supposed to play or fight to win? What were they even supposed to accomplish? Should they kill Naoki? Or was the point to escape the now sealed-off school?

Hiroshi let out a deep, heavy sigh. He knew all too well that they would never solve anything with so little information.

3

Pain. His lungs were on fire. His heart was pounding so fast he feared it might explode at any minute.

He hadn't run like that since field day in middle school. He'd gone so long and so hard that his quivering legs now refused to listen to him, like they didn't even belong to him. Muscles throughout his body, atrophied from years of neglect, begged pitifully for rest. He was at his limit. If he ran any more, he would simply break down.

Using the last of his strength, Inoue Noritsugi burst into the science lab. He'd been in here just minutes earlier to change the water in the tank, so the door was already unlocked. He closed it as quietly as he could behind him and stumbled further inside the room. He retrieved a scalpel from a drawer reserved for dangerous tools, and gripped it tightly in his right hand as he hid under a desk. He cut the flashlight and tried to breathe as little as possible.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

Slow footsteps approached.

He slapped a hand over his mouth, desperately trying to keep a lid on the

scream ready to burst out of his lungs. There was no telling what exactly would happen to him if he were found, but he knew it wouldn't be good.

Damn it!

He cursed internally, not daring to say a word out loud.

Why is this happening to me?

He ground his teeth so hard that the iron taste of blood began to spread in his mouth.

I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't do anything wrong.

He repeated the same thought over and over in his head like a mantra. He didn't even know who he was trying to convince.

Naoki's doppelganger had been right. Inoue recognized the bullying early on. However, he'd never had even the slightest intention of getting involved. A teacher's interference was unlikely to solve anything. It might just make things worse. The bully would only turn harder on a snitch, perhaps learning to be more careful so as to keep out of the eyes of adults. Kids had to learn to stand up for themselves or else they would be bullied for the rest of their lives. That was Inoue's theory.

It wasn't just a problem he was avoiding. Bullying was a real issue even in the adult world. Plenty of his friends from his schooldays had quit their jobs, unable to handle the abuses of power poured on them by their superiors, never to return to full-time work again. Others simply fell into depression when forced to work overtime by companies with no respect for labor laws or common decency. By allowing the children to try and fail in resolving their problems on their own, he was helping them learn what real life was like. Leaving them to their own devices was just his way of trying to instill independence in them. That's right. He was helping them. He hadn't done anything wrong.

Tap, tap... Tap.

The footsteps suddenly stopped in front of the science prep room.

Does it know I'm here?

Inoue held his breath. The door slowly opened. The ceiling light flipped on, illuminating everything in a sudden burst of light.

“Mr. Inoue, there’s no point in hiding.”

Naoki’s voice echoed through the now-lit room.

“I know you’re doing your best to hold your breath so I won’t find you, but you can’t stop your heartbeat,” he said, giggling. “I can hear your pulse, even from meters away.”

Don’t be fooled. It’s all a bluff. No normal human can hear a heartbeat... Wait...

Recalling what he’d seen Naoki turn into at the school entrance, his whole spine went cold. Those bulging eyes, that oddly twisted face, that blue skin... Nothing about that seemed like a normal human. Moreover, Naoki was dead. Inoue had never heard anything about him having a brother, much less a twin... So just who was this boy?

“Found you, Mr. Inoue,” Naoki said gleefully as he popped into view, squatting down to look up at his former teacher. “They say a female student committed suicide in this room long ago. Then a few months later, the kids who bullied her wound up strangled to death by the model skeleton. It’s just a rumor, so who knows if there’s any truth to it, but it scared the other students badly enough that they avoided this place at all costs. That was perfect for me, honestly. It meant I could hide out here in peace during breaks.”

“A-Ah...”

Inoue didn’t even have the energy to scream. Naoki’s face was even more warped than it was before. He no longer looked like himself, or whoever he was...

“This was my favorite spot, actually. Mind scooting over?”

“Aaah... H-Help... Help me...”

Panicking, Inoue crawled backward straight into the wall. There was no way to escape.

“Would you mind telling me one thing?” Naoki asked, the corners of his lips

drawn up all the way to his ears. “Why didn’t you help me?”

“Ah... Ahhh...”

“Did you not care about me?”

“Help me... Help me, please...”

“If you don’t answer me, I’ll kill you.” His voice was a low mumble. “So tell me. Was I a hindrance to you or something?”

“O-Of course not. I was always concerned about you.”

I can’t die here...

Inoue searched desperately for the right words to soothe Naoki.

“B-But... But I didn’t know what to do. Bullying is a difficult problem. You understand, don’t you? I discussed it with the principal and came up with some plans of action, but by then, you’d...”

“Liar. You were never concerned about me.”

“It’s not a lie. I’m your teacher. I tried to help—”

“You just didn’t want to get on Takuro’s bad side, right? His father holds all the real power in this town. If you annoyed his son, who knows what might happen to you? And I don’t blame you for that. It’s only natural, I think. We all put ourselves first in the end.”

“N-No, that’s not true!”

“N-No, that’s not true!” Naoki mimicked in a derisive tone before bursting into laughter.

“...Naoki?”

“Enough with the lies.”

“I haven’t lied to you.”

“That’s a lie, too.”

“No, you have to believe me.”

“Then why did you always give Takuro special treatment? Or did you think I didn’t know your little secret? Whenever there was a surprise backpack

inspection, you'd let Takuro know in advance. You knew he was cheating on his tests, yet you pretended not to notice. Did you think trying to curry his favor would get you something down the line?"

"I never..."

"You sure worked hard to worm your way up in this world. Too bad Takuro's father is dead now, huh?"

"..."

"Wanna know something funny? Do you know how Takuro's father bought the farm?"

"...What are you saying?"

"I'm the only one who knows the truth about his death."

"Don't tell me you..." The next words were too horrible for him to even utter. "Are you going to kill me, too?"

"My, what *should* I do?"

Naoki sounded delighted, and swayed his head back and forth like he was having trouble making up his mind. Watching him, Inoue realized the truth.

He's serious...

The top of his skull tingled numbly.

No, I don't want to die...

Completely cornered, Inoue's survival instincts began to kick in. He tightened his grip on the scalpel in his right hand.

"Raaah!"

Mustering the last of his courage, Inoue burst out from under the desk. He went right for Naoki, tackling him with his shoulder. He must have taken him by surprise, for Naoki fell straight back onto the floor.

This is my chance!

Inoue lifted his right arm and drove the scalpel straight down into Naoki's neck. Bodily fluids spewed everywhere, painting the room blue.

“Ugh... Ahhh...” Looking at the sticky liquid covering his hands, Inoue let out a pathetic moan. “It’s not blood? What... What *are* you?”

“That was mean, Mr. Inoue. I can’t believe you tried to kill me.”

Removing the scalpel protruding from his neck, Naoki stood up. He didn’t seem to be any more bothered by it than he would be by a bee sting.

Inoue turned and glanced at the drawer he’d gotten the scalpel from. It had been the only one. There was little else in the room other than the tanks for the fish and amoebas. Hardly anything that could pass as a weapon.

“Help me!” Inoue shouted as he turned back to Naoki.

He could only hope and pray now.

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” he declared, shaking his head so violently he nearly twisted it clean off. “I was laying the groundwork to save you the whole time. I just needed a little more time. If only you hadn’t...”

“Humans are so interesting,” Naoki said with a bitter laugh, almost as if he weren’t human himself. “They’ll say and do whatever it takes to live, no matter how unseemly.”

“I’m not lying. You have to believe me. And I didn’t treat Takuro differently because I was afraid of his father. It was for the class’s sake. It’s easier for the class to band together around someone like him. I knew that, and so I turned a blind eye to his transgressions. And it worked, didn’t it?”

“Oh, so that’s what it was?” Naoki asked, a vein in his temple visibly twitching.

“Do you understand now?”

“Yeah, I do. Really, humans are so very interesting. Even when you’re lying, a little bit of the truth slips out.”

“Huh?”

“In order to unite the class, you needed a victim. Someone like me to be bullied.”

“No, I didn’t—”

“I’m *very* disappointed in you. In fact, the thought of you living another

second just makes my blood boil.”

“N-Now just hold on...”

“Goodbye, Mr. Inoue.”

Naoki’s expression was fearsome. And it was the last thing Inoue ever saw.

“Goodbye, Mr. Inoue.”

The moment Naoki made to attack, a blue shadow leaped from a tank on the shelf. It landed on Inoue’s face, completely smothering him.

“Aaaaah!”

The room filled with his muffled screams as the gelatinous substance pulsed and crawled its way across his face. It was covered in a striking pattern that resembled human eyeballs. No, it wasn’t a pattern... They were swiveling restlessly and blinking repeatedly. They were actual eyeballs.

The amoeba monster swallowed Inoue’s face entirely. He struggled for a time, but eventually both that and his screaming stopped. He twitched and spasmed briefly, then ceased moving altogether.

What is this monster?

Naoki stood there dumbly, staring down at Inoue’s body.

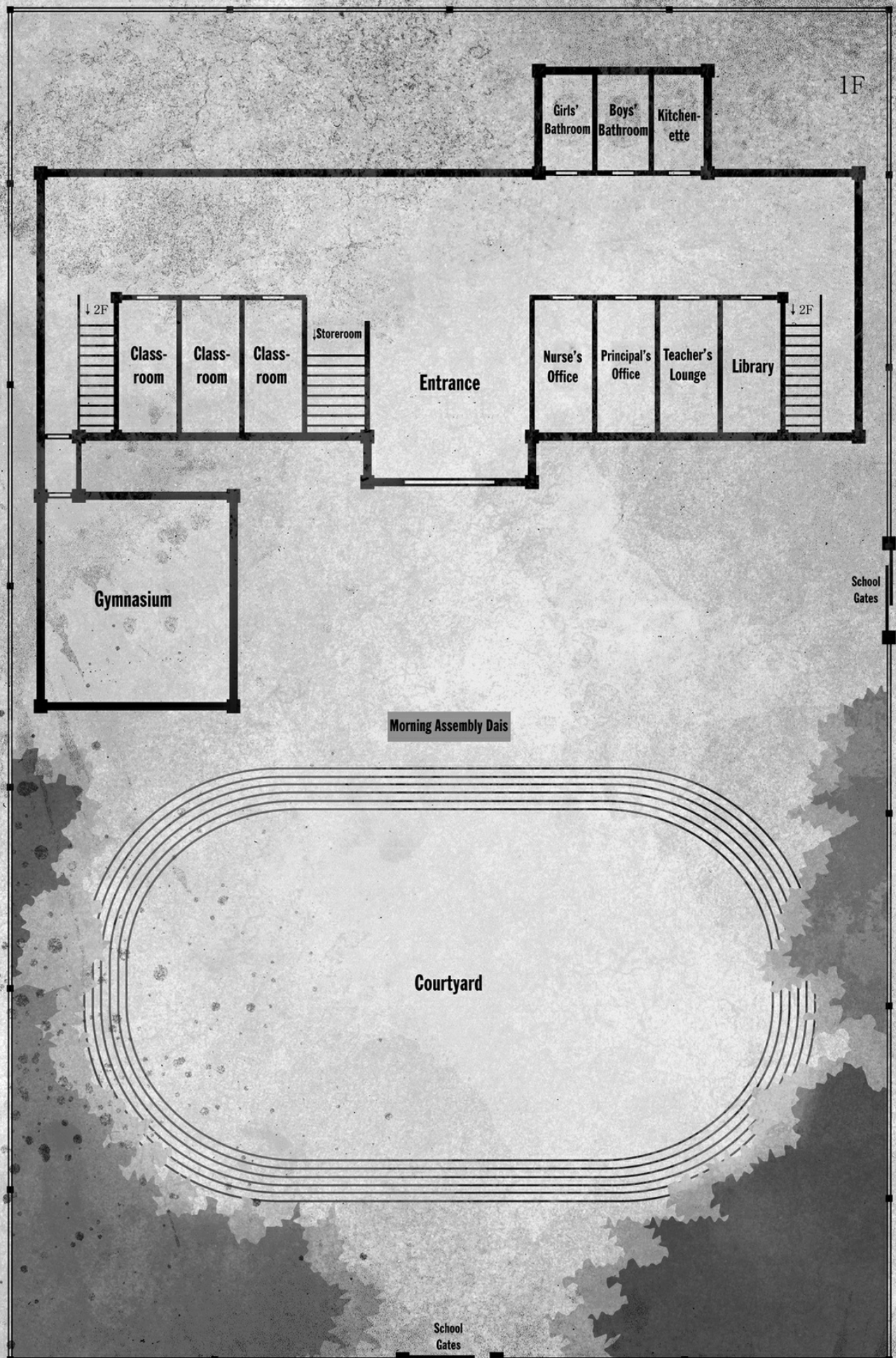
Kwirrr...

The monster’s eyes all turned to face him. He then heard a strange, high-pitched sound like what you might hear when fast-forwarding a scene. It was coming from the monster.

Kwirrr... Kwirrrrr...

To Naoki’s ears, it almost sounded like the monster was laughing.







Chapter 5

KIKEN

—Danger—

1

With Anna's help, Mika pulled on the front door to the school with all her might. They were both monstrously strong, and yet not even their combined efforts made it budge.

It had only been a few minutes since a bluish white light had enveloped the school. The instant it faded, all the doors and windows to the building were covered with metal plates. Bang and pound on them as they might, all the girls had to show for it were red and bruised fists. There didn't seem to be any way to pull them off, either.

"What do we do? Hiroshi was totally right."

If they couldn't get in, then would the boys be able to get out? Takuro and the others were still inside, and worry swirled in Mika's heart for them. It seemed the small, blocky creature in her arms detected its owner's distress, as it began whining and licking her cheek with its long tongue. It was like it was trying to comfort her.

Thanks, Fwuffy...

Patting its soft, memory foam-like head, Mika turned back to Anna.

"What do you think?"

"Let's call the police like Hiroshi said," Anna replied without hesitation.

Mika should have expected nothing less from the class president. Anna was undoubtedly worried sick about Shun, but she was staying calm and collected... unlike Mika, who was just about ready to freak out.

I have to get it together... It's about a kilometer to the nearest police station, but with these legs, I'm sure I could make it there in a few minutes.

"Wait here. I'll be right back."

Mika handed Fwuffy to Anna and bent over to tighten her shoelaces, when...

"What are you two doing?" a male voice suddenly asked.

Mika stopped and looked up to see two of their classmates approaching. The

narrow-eyed boy was Kazuya, a member of the biology club; the girl with the glasses was Mari, the quietest kid in their class.

“Good morning. What are you two doing here so early?” Anna asked, hiding Fwuffy behind her back and smiling broadly.

“I was worried that Panzee forgot to change the water in the tank in the science lab after club yesterday.”

“You woke up early just for that?”

“Of course I did! Without our help, the amoebas would all die! How could I just abandon them?” Kazuya answered near fervently.

Mika couldn't help thinking he was almost as bad as Hiroshi.

“I-I'm on classroom duty today...” Mari muttered from behind Kazuya.

Classroom duty involved watering the flowers, cleaning the blackboard, and various other chores that needed to be taken care of before class. The students took turns doing them on a rotating schedule, but only a punctual, serious girl like Mari would show up this early for something like that.

“But you guys came to school together, did you? What's that all about, hmm? What's going on here?”

There was a gleam in Anna's eyes. Normally, she was the type to stay as far away from gossip as possible. It sounded to Mika like she was just doing everything she could to draw out the conversation while she thought of a way to handle this.

“There's nothing going on. We just happened to arrive at the same time,” Kazuya said slightly heatedly, his face turning red.

“No way, no how. I mean, I...” Mari caught herself there and fell into embarrassed silence.



“What? Is there someone else you like?”

“Who cares about us? She’s the real issue here,” Kazuya suddenly declared, pointing his finger at Mika.

She couldn’t ever remember speaking to him before, so she had no idea why he’d be so blatantly rude. She even reflexively turned to look over her shoulder and make sure he wasn’t actually pointing to someone behind her.

“You’re okay, right? You’re not hurt? Where have you been? What about Takuro? Where is he? Is he okay?” he asked.

Mika was a bit staggered by the barrage of questions, but it made sense once she stopped to think about it. It had been a week since she’d been attacked at the Jailhouse. Obviously, it was a big deal that she’d reappeared.

“Takuro’s fine...”

Unsure where to start, she answered Kazuya’s last question. Of course, she knew it wasn’t really the truth, but it was the only thing she could bring herself to say.

“That’s a relief. Everyone was worried. Some of the kids were even saying you guys got attacked by the Jailhouse monster and it cast this weird spell over the whole class... So, really, it’s a relief to know you’re okay. I’m glad everything turned out all right.”

Kazuya smiled so broadly that his narrow eyes narrowed even further. Normally people would be a little more curious about the details after someone up and disappeared for a week, but it seemed Kazuya wasn’t the type to sweat the small stuff. He was just glad Mika was well, and Mika was grateful that. She wasn’t sure how she was going to respond if he did pester her. Moreover, they didn’t have the time for that.

“Actually, it’s a relief to see you’re over your cold as well, Anna. Hiroshi’s been out too, so people have been starting to think that the Jailhouse monster had claimed more victims. Things have been pretty dark,” Kazuya said as he casually strode toward the entrance to the school.

He placed a hand on the door, but it would never open.

“What’s going on here?”

It was only then that he seemed to realize something was strange. He touched the metal plates sealing the door shut and cocked his head to the side.

“Are they remodeling or something?”

He seemed unfazed, despite the total strangeness of the situation.

“Hey... isn’t this kind of weird?” Mari asked, her knitted brow a clear indication of worry. “It looks like all the windows from the first to the third floor are covered.”

“Yeah. It’s got to be some kind of construction, right?”

“Wouldn’t the teachers have mentioned something like that? Did you hear anything about it, Kazuya?”

“No, nothing.”

“Even the front door is locked... Something’s definitely weird here.”

“Maybe we just got here too early?”

“You may not know this, but Mr. Inoue always comes to school early to clean the teacher’s lounge and the toilets. He gets here every day right after six, just like clockwork. And yet...”

“Maybe he overslept.”

“I hope so...”

A tense look on her face, Mari fell silent again.

Wait, every morning right after six?

A dark sense of foreboding tickled at Mika’s heart. It was around 6:20 AM when they awoke on the school lawn. And if Mr. Inoue had gotten there before them...

Anna turned to her, a fraught look on her face. Their anxious eyes stayed locked on each other for a tense moment, both of them wondering the same thing... Was Panzee inside the building?

“Hey, do you guys know something?”

As if sensing something from their silent exchange, Mari stepped toward Anna, who was at a loss for words. She looked like a fish out of water, her mouth gaping for a reply.

“If you do, tell me. What’s going on?”

Mari continued to press Anna, but didn’t so much as look at Mika. It made her realize they’d never actually spoken before.

She’s probably scared of me.

Mika’s chest tightened painfully at the thought. She rarely approached the other girls in class. It had never bothered her before, but now it felt like she’d missed out on something. That realization was hard to bear.

“All right... I need you to stay calm and listen to me,” Anna said, sounding like she’d finally resolved herself to tell the truth.

But just then...

“Aaaaah!”

A deep scream came from inside the building.

2

They all recognized that low, husky voice.

“Was that... Panzee?” Kazuya said under his breath.

The scream was shortly accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.

“Panzee!”

The color drained from Kazuya’s face. He immediately tried to force the door open, but there was no way a mere human like him would succeed where Mika and Anna had failed.

“Damn it!”

He kicked the door in frustration, then turned away from the girls and began running along the side of the building.

“Kazuya, where are you going?” Anna shouted after him.

“To save Panzee!” he shouted back as he rounded the corner, headed for the back of the school.

“Don’t, Kazuya! It’s dangerous!” Mari shrieked in a shrill voice.

She took a step with her right foot in an attempt to chase after him, but fear had frozen her knees. Her legs would no longer support her, and she went tumbling toward the ground.

“Mari!”

Anna reflexively threw her arms out to try and catch her, essentially dumping Fwuffy—who she’d been holding behind her back—onto the ground in front of her.

“...!”

Mari took one look at the strange creature and gasped before fainting.

“Mari, stay with me! Oh, no... Mika, you go after Kazuya!”

“Got it,” Mika agreed with a nod.

She left Mari in Anna’s care, then took off.

It’ll be fine. The windows are all sealed. He can’t possibly get inside...

Rounding the corner, Mika slowed to a stop.

“It can’t be...”

The boys’ bathroom window was open. For some reason, it was the only spot uncovered by the metal plates.

Mika grabbed the ledge and jumped up to take a look inside. She couldn’t see much, but she could hear the sound of footsteps darting off.

Crap.

Kazuya was already inside.

Mika wormed her way up over the ledge and squeezed through the window. She dropped down to the cold tile below, not at all concerned that she was in the boys’ bathroom right now.

I know I have to go after him... But should I really leave this window open? I

bet plenty of the boys know about this. If they all band together and sneak in through here...

Mika was lost in thought, but a shrill noise suddenly snapped her out of it.

“Skree!”

It was Fwuffy, who was standing in the window and looking down at her with its cute, round eyes.

“No, Fwuffy. Stay.” Mika shook her head. “You wait here. Don’t move, even if someone sees you. If you keep your eyes and mouth shut, no one will think you’re alive—”

No sooner than those words left her mouth, Mika had a brilliant idea.

“That’s it, Fwuffy! Just stay there in the window and pretend to be part of the wall. Don’t let anyone in, okay? Got that?”

Fwuffy’s steely coloration was quite similar to the metal plates. If it stayed put, it would certainly be enough to fool anyone who walked by. And it seemed to understand Mika’s request, for it gave a small nod before wedging itself in place and blocking off the window. It really did look just like one of the metal plates.

“Thanks, Fwuffy. I know it’s boring, but just hang there for a bit. If something happens, come to me—no, protect Takuro.”

Mika raised her right hand and waved to her tiny partner before turning on her heels and dashing from the bathroom. The hall was quiet. All the windows were sealed there, too. If not for the ceiling lights, it would have been pitch black inside.

Now, where did Kazuya go...?

Mika looked around, turning her head just in time to see a dark shadow burst from one of the doors.

3

The sound of Mr. Inoue’s scream reached Hiroshi’s ears just as he finished

helping carry Takuro to the nurse's office. He and Takeshi locked eyes with one another, but the screaming died down as suddenly as it had started. Takeshi's lips wrinkled in frustration. After everything he'd been through, the dark feeling brewing in his gut told him that there was no saving Mr. Inoue. Hiroshi seemed to know it too.

"What... What do we do now?" Takeshi asked, looking at him with imploring eyes. "I'm starting to lose confidence. Can we really change his mind?"

Hiroshi had no immediate answer, and couldn't even nod in reply.

The hatred Naoki had radiated when he saw Mr. Inoue was so dark and overwhelming that it had given Hiroshi goosebumps. A simple appeal to reason was unlikely to move his heart. And now that he was a monster too, it would be difficult to even restrain him. He'd sent Takuro flying with no trouble earlier.

Hiroshi searched the room for anything they might be able to use as a weapon, but came up empty-handed. It was only a middle school nurse's office, after all. Anything dangerous would be kept well out of reach of the children. Hiroshi opened every drawer in the room in hopes of turning up a scalpel or a syringe, but the best he could find was a pair of scissors.

"Hey, Hiroshi," Takeshi called softly. "Do you hear footsteps in the hall?"

"Huh?"

Hiroshi concentrated, but he couldn't hear anything other than the sleeping Takuro's sound breathing. With Takeshi's enhanced hearing, however, Hiroshi knew good and well that Takeshi might have heard something he simply couldn't.

Hiroshi tentatively approached the door, careful not to make a sound, and opened it a crack. Peering out into the hall, he saw Mika standing there.

"Mika!"

"Hey, Mika, what do you think you're doing?"

He and Takeshi both jumped into the hall.

"Eek!"

She gave a short yelp and leaped back into a corner of the hall, but soon her

expression relaxed.

“Jeez... Don’t scare me like that.”

A hand to her chest, she sighed deeply.

“Mika, why are you here?” Hiroshi asked.

“You heard Panzee scream just now, right?” She quickly explained, “Kazuya was sure something bad happened to him, so he snuck in through the bathroom window. I went after him, but...”

“Kazuya? You mean our classmate who uses a pencil case with a pattern like that of an Argynnis hyperbius?”

“Argyle what now? I mean Shiraishi Kazuya. The guy with the squinty eyes that completely disappear when he smiles!”

“I sincerely doubt his eyes ever disappear.”

“Whatever! If we don’t hurry, he’s going to die!”

“So those footsteps earlier were Kazuya, huh? He shot up the west-side staircase like a bullet,” Takeshi said, pointing down the hall.

“Not good. We have to go after him, and fast!”

Suddenly, Mika seemed to realize that Takuro wasn’t with the other boys.

“Wait, where’s Takuro?” she asked, her expression clouding over as she approached Hiroshi.

“Takuro’s—”

She seemed to read the rest of his answer in his face before he could even say it. She pushed past Hiroshi and Takeshi, practically bursting through the door to the nurse’s office. Seeing Takura laid out on a bed, she stood there aghast.

“What happened?” she asked in a near whisper, her eyes unmoving from her beloved.

“Naoki knocked him out...” Takeshi muttered.

“His pulse is stable, and he’s breathing,” explained Hiroshi more precisely. “I didn’t see any wounds either, so it’s most likely just a mild concussion.”

Seemingly relieved to hear all this, Mika sank into the folding chair sitting next to the bed with a heavy sigh.

“So he’s okay?”

“Yes. However, I’m concerned about leaving him alone. Would you mind watching over him, Mika? We’ll go after Kazuya.”

“Sure. Just leave him to me.”

Mika sat there for a long, silent moment as she sweetly held Takuro’s hand.

“Hey, Hiroshi...” she then called out softly, her lips barely moving. “Please. When you find Naoki...”

He couldn’t hear the rest.

“When we find him, what?” he asked.

But Mika shook her head.

“No, it’s nothing. Just be careful,” she said with a smile.

“Very well. We’ll be off, then.”

Bidding Mika goodbye, he closed the door to the nurse’s office behind him and Takeshi when they left.

“Let’s go.”

Takeshi nodded, and the two boys took off down the hallway.

Hiroshi hadn’t heard her clearly, but he could imagine what she’d said.

Please. When you find Naoki...

Her vengeful eyes said it all.

When you find Naoki, kill him.



Chapter 6

KISHUU

—Ambush—

1

Hiroshi ran as fast as his legs could carry him, with Takeshi following closely behind. They could hear Kazuya screaming from the next floor.

“Kazuya!”

Bounding up the stairs two at a time, they quickly reached the next level, where they could see Kazuya standing just down the hall in front of the science lab.

“Kazuya, are you okay?”

Hiroshi hurriedly ran over to his classmate, but Kazuya was as white as a sheet and shivering all over. He could barely respond.

“Ahhh... Ahhhhh...”

Hiroshi peered inside the door Kazuya was staring through. The science lab was in total disorder. Cabinets were toppled, and the floor was littered with broken glass. And in the center of it all lay their homeroom teacher face-up. His eyes were wide open and empty. He wasn't moving. It was quite clear to Hiroshi he was dead. His tongue, hanging from his mouth, was turning purple.

“Heh heh heh...” Chuckling, Naoki stepped out from the shadow of a desk. “Humans are so, so fragile. They die too easily.”

Unlike when Hiroshi had seen him last at the entrance, Naoki was back in his human form. He reared his head back, a joking expression on his face.

“Now, which one of you will it be next?”

He looked at the three boys in turn, licking his lips. It was completely uncharacteristic, right down to the glint in his eye.

“Naoki... Please, open your eyes. This isn't like you,” Takeshi said, his voice quivering as he stared at the horror before him.

“Not like me? Of course it's not. I've been through hell and back. Wouldn't it be crazier if that hadn't changed me?”

“But murdering Panzee...?”

“Naoki, there’s something I’d like to ask you,” Hiroshi asked, cutting Takeshi off. “Did you really kill him?”

He’d instantly sensed something odd about Mr. Inoue’s corpse. His face was terribly burned, as if bathed in acid, and his whole body was a bluish-purple. He also had claw-like scratch marks on his neck, but no other external wounds. Out of all their encounters with the blue monsters so far, they’d never seen them attack like this. It just didn’t add up.

“Of course. What did you think? Do you see anyone else here?” Naoki quickly replied.

But Hiroshi didn’t miss the slight shift in his eyes. It appeared he was lying.

“Well? How did it feel to kill someone?” Hiroshi asked, attempting to poke and prod Naoki in order to ascertain the truth. “Do you feel better now that you’ve avenged yourself?”

“Yes, it’s exhilarating.”

Even Hiroshi, obtuse as he was when it came to matters of the heart, could tell those words rang false.

“Surely you’ve realized by now that killing all of our classmates won’t truly give you any satisfaction.”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Naoki suddenly shouted and slammed his fist against the wall.

The whole room shook, and cracks radiated outward in the concrete from the point of impact.

“I suggest you not make me angry. If I felt like it, I could kill every last person in this town.”

With those fists, he probably could. A normal person like Hiroshi or Kazuya would never stand a chance against him.

“Or do you really think I’m some weakling that would never hurt a fly? If that’s the case, why don’t I kill him right now to show you what I’m really capable of?”

Naoki pointed to Kazuya, who was still standing in the hall, frozen stiff. A

manic hate filled his eyes. He may have been lying before, but this was no bluff. Kazuya was genuinely in danger.

“Hiroshi, leave this to me and run!”

Takeshi suddenly stepped between Hiroshi and Naoki. He put a finger to his brow and grunted heartily before he began rapidly growing.

“I got this. Naoki can’t control his body yet like I can. And if I’m the only one in my monster form, this is as good as won.”

For the moment, Hiroshi’s most pressing task was getting Kazuya to safety.

“Thank you, Takeshi. I’ll be right back.”

And so he grabbed Kazuya by the hand and forcefully dragged him away.

2

Naoki seemed entirely unperturbed by Takeshi’s monstrous transformation. An impenetrable smile still on his face, he stared down Takeshi.

“So, Takeshi, what are you going to do with me?” Cocking his head to the side, he crossed his arms behind his back. “Are you going to hit me? Bully me like you used to?”

The contempt in his eyes felt like a knife in Takeshi’s heart. After what he’d done, he knew that Naoki hated him. But he didn’t want things to end like this.

“I’m sorry,” Takeshi said, bowing his head and letting out the feelings he’d been bottling up ever since Naoki’s death. “I’m really, really sorry...”

“Huh?” Naoki snorted. “Don’t you think it’s a little late for that?”

“I’ve always wanted to apologize.”

Nothing about this was calculated or planned. Takeshi was simply speaking from the heart.

His thoughts drifted back to the days they actually got along. They’d first gotten to know each other in the early summer of their first year in middle school. It all started during a cooking lesson in home ec. Seeing Naoki stuffing his face with some of the best-looking curry he’d ever seen, Takeshi couldn’t

resist the urge to ask him about the recipe. The rest was history.

They hit it off surprisingly well. They both loved ramen and fried rice. And when it came to rice balls, it was dried tuna flakes or bust for both of them. They had all kinds of things in common. They even had the same tastes in TV shows and girls.

So... how did we end up this way?

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. If I’d had the courage to stand up to Takuro, none of this ever would have happened. I know just apologizing won’t be enough to make it up to you, but... I’m stupid, so this was all I could think of...”

“Indeed, your stupidity has exceeded my expectations. You’re so stupid, in fact, that it’s pissing me off even more.”

“Can’t we start over?”

“Start over? We’re both *dead*. What, exactly, are we going to do like this?” Naoki asked, his brow twitching.

“We were friends, weren’t we? Maybe we could have some fun together like we used to—”

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?!” Naoki roared so loudly that it rattled the glass panes in the hallway windows. “Do you have any idea how much it killed me the first time you betrayed me?”

Naoki was angry, and it was starting to show quite literally. His skin was deepening in color as it turned a dark blue.

“That’s right... I thought of you as a friend. And yet... And yet you...”

In the blink of an eye, his body morphed and grew.

Shoot...

Takeshi cursed his own foolishness. His goal was to pin Naoki down before he transformed in case talking to him didn’t work out, but that plan had quickly gone off the rails.

Naoki now dwarfed Takeshi, but he was still growing without any sign of slowing down. The muscles in his arms pulsed like the very blood within them

was boiling.

“Raaahhhhh!”

There'd be nothing he could do if Naoki got any bigger, so, with a shout, Takeshi charged headlong at Naoki, intent on ramming him in the stomach. But he'd never get the chance.

Takeshi suddenly felt himself floating in the air as his feet left the ground. Looking up, he saw the sneering face of a monster. Holding him by the scruff of his neck, it laughed as he swayed from side to side. Try as he might to fight back, his fists only caught air. It was useless.

An inhuman howl bellowed forth from Naoki's monstrous mouth as he slammed Takeshi into the wall. He heard his own backbone make a sickening cracking sound. He coughed and intense pain shot through his whole body. Instantly, he no longer felt like fighting.

But Naoki's attack continued mercilessly. Approaching from the left, he kicked him straight in the gut. Unable to offer any form of resistance, Takeshi flew into the opposite wall like a rag doll.

It's no use. Naoki's power knows no bounds. I don't stand a chance in a straight-up fight with him. I hate to admit it, but I need to retreat for now...

Enduring the pain, he stood up. Naoki charged, fangs bared. Dodging at the last second, Takeshi fled the science prep room. His giant body stood out too much and weighed him down in terms of agility, so the instant he took to the hall, he put a finger to his brow, concentrated, and returned to his human form.

Then he heard what sounded like an explosion behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder as he ran to see the monster walking through the gaping hole it had just busted in the wall. A bestial, ear-splitting roar reverberated up and down the hall. There was no longer any trace of Naoki left. His consciousness had probably been taken over by the monster too. Talking would be a waste of time now.

The monster hunched over in a cramped fashion as it strode forward, like the ceiling was too low for it. Its eyes fixated on Takeshi, it tottered from side to side like a drunkard. It almost looked intentional. Was it enjoying watching him

freak out?

Whatever. I just need to focus on running.

Every step he took sent pain shooting through his entire body. A normal human would have passed out by now. But Takeshi grit his teeth and ran all the way to the eastern wing of the building. Nearly falling, he made his way down the stairs there.

Bashing in the door with his right fist, he then burst into the library. The busted door would make it obvious where he'd gone, but Takeshi already knew that Naoki had heightened senses of smell and hearing just like he did. Even if he tried to hide, it would only be a matter of time before Naoki found him.

That's why he'd come to the library. He figured he could navigate the maze of bookcases better considering his size, possibly giving him an advantage. He had no real plan other than that, but dove into the shadow of a bookcase anyway, desperately hoping things would work out somehow. He stumbled a little, bumping his shoulder on the corner of the case and sending a few books tumbling from its shelves.

"Shoot!"

He quickly stooped to gather the scattered tomes, but the very first one he grabbed made him freeze.

"Oh... this book..."

Just as he was about to flip through its pages...

"Oh, Taaakeeshiii..." Naoki's innocent singsong voice made his very eardrums shudder.

Sticking the book under his arm, Takeshi cautiously peeked out from the shadow of the bookcase. Naoki had returned to his original form. He was standing at the library entrance, arms casually hanging by his sides. Takeshi held his breath. If he waited for the right moment, he still might be able to grab him and pin him down. But if he moved so much as a muscle before then, Naoki would instantly know where he was.

What do I do?

“Come on out, Takeshi.”

Naoki’s voice was coming from the exact same place; he hadn’t moved yet. He still hadn’t pinpointed Takeshi’s location.

Think. This is my chance to turn this around. How do I get closer to Naoki?

“We’re friends, aren’t we? Come on out and play,” Naoki giggled, as if he found something he’d said hilarious. “Takeshi, where are you? Don’t hide. Please. I’m so lonely.”

Takeshi was in pain. He needed to breathe. But as soon as he did, Naoki would find him.

What do I do? Someone tell me!

He was at his limit. Preparing himself, he was just about to open his mouth and gasp for air, when...

“Huh... Guess he’s not here. I’ll check elsewhere,” Naoki said, disappointed.

Takeshi then heard the sound of a door shutting.

I’m saved...

All the tension drained from his body. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief and slumped over.

“...Just kidding.”

Warm breath tickled his ear. Takeshi’s head jerked to the side to see Naoki standing there right next to him.

3

“Wha?”

His body stiffened from the shock.

“You’re so amazingly stupid. I can’t believe you fell for such a simple trick.”

Crap!

Takeshi tried to run, but Naoki had his hand around his throat before he could even move. His grip was fearsome. Takeshi’s fingers began to tingle, and the

book he was holding under his right arm dropped to the floor.

Takeshi grabbed Naoki's wrist in an attempt to rip his arm off, but he was virtually powerless against him. It was like he was trying to challenge a professional wrestler. In other words, a losing fight. Takeshi's vision began to narrow. He tried to monsterize, but couldn't focus enough.

Not good. I'm going to die.

The moment his consciousness started to fade, Naoki let go of him. Coughing, Takeshi fell to his knees on the spot.

Did he spare me?

Rubbing his burning throat, he looked up. But his hopes were misplaced.

"I can't have you dying on me just yet." Naoki pursed his lips. "No, this would be too easy. You have to suffer much, much more."

He then kicked Takeshi in the gut. It was a ruthless blow. Takeshi could hear his internal organs squishing. The contents of his stomach shot up his esophagus. Out of his mouth exploded a burst of fresh blue blood.

"This isn't anywhere near the pain I experienced."

The same unflappable smile on his face, Naoki picked up the book at his feet. It was the one Takeshi had been holding.

"What is this?"

His expression suddenly changed upon seeing its cover.

"You remember it, don't you?" Takeshi asked, suppressing the pain that was pulsating through his body with every beat of his heart. "It's a book about international cuisine. After that cooking class, we'd always come here during recess and look at it."

"Do you think I'm going to have some change of heart after reminiscing about the past a little? Please. This is only going to irritate me even more. Would you stop wasting my time already?"

It was true that Takeshi had grabbed the book in hopes that it would melt Naoki's frozen heart, but after feeling firsthand just how much stronger Naoki

was, he realized it didn't matter.

"Do you remember that Brazilian dish... What was it called? The one you always wanted to try at least once..."

Takeshi paused there to wipe the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. Just talking was enough to make him spasm in pain.

"Stop it!" Naoki shouted. "That was all in the past! No one cares about that now!"

He reached out and took Takeshi by the neck again. He was only holding him lightly with one hand this time, but to Takeshi, it felt like his windpipe was coiled in tightening iron chains.

"That's enough talking from you," Naoki said in an oddly strained tone. "I've changed my mind. It physically pains me to hear you prattle on, so you're going to die right now. If I squeeze just a little harder, that's it. Lights out. Are you ready?"

"You remember, don't you...? The name of that Brazilian dish...?"

Everything was going black. Barely managing to eke out a raspy reply, Takeshi was all too aware he was dying. Not too long ago the mere thought of his own mortality was enough to make him quake in his boots. But faced with it now, he was shockingly calm.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Naoki screamed hysterically.



But, feeling like he'd yet to relay all of his bottled-up emotions, Takeshi soldiered on.

"What was it called...?"

"I said shut up! Are you deaf?! I really will kill you!"

"I think it was fei..."

"Stop!"

"Feijo..."

"Feijoada," Naoki replied raggedly.

"Ah, yeah. That's what it was." Takeshi smiled. "I tried to make it a bunch of times. I wanted you to try it once I got it right."

"..."

Naoki said not a word, but his iron grip on Takeshi's throat loosened ever so slightly.

"The real tricky part was getting the black beans just right. If you don't do that, it's really just braised pork..."

His vision turned blurry. Naoki looked like he was saying something, but Takeshi couldn't make out what. Memories of the past—the two of them talking over the cookbook, oblivious to time—surfaced fresh in his mind.

"It's only been half a year since then. How did things go so wrong?" Looking up at the ceiling, Takeshi laughed in self-derision. "I wish you could have tried... my special fried rice."

There, Naoki released Takeshi completely.

"That's not fair..." he said faintly.

"Naoki... I'm sorry."

The depths of his nose stung. Tears naturally began to overflow.

"If... If..." Takeshi stammered between snuffles. "If we could start over, do you think this time—"

He sensed something approaching with incredible speed, but all he could see

was the abject look of shock on Naoki's face. The next thing he knew, the left side of his head was hot. The ringing in his ears was terrible.

And then everything was over. The world around Takeshi was plunged into darkness.

The liquid that splashed out of the left side of his head stained the floor of the library bright blue. Naoki could only stare in amazement. It had all happened in the blink of an eye.

A dark blue object shot out from between the bookcases and slashed Takeshi's left temple. His head split vertically, spilling blood and brains everywhere. Takeshi then fell forward, never to get up again. He likely never even realized what had happened.

The thing that had attacked him did a flip in the air before alighting atop a bookcase. Naoki could hardly believe the strangeness he was beholding. Its tennis ball-sized head moved busily. It acted much like a bird, but it had no beak or feathers. Just blue skin. Giant eyes. Sharp fangs. Although on a much smaller scale, it had the same twisted and disproportionate face Naoki did when monsterized. It had no torso to speak of, either. Only two thorn-like protrusions sticking out from the rear of its head. There were also two long, antennae-like appendages that extended from beneath its jaw, apparently keeping it stabilized.

What is this?

The monster that had attacked Mr. Inoue in the science lab was utterly bizarre, but this flying creature was even weirder.

That one saved you, then?

A female voice rattled the trembling Naoki. He reflexively looked up at the bookshelf. He'd assumed it had come from the flying monster that killed Takeshi, but apparently that wasn't the case.

Get it together. You mustn't be led astray by sweet words. Remember just what horrors they inflicted on you.

He covered his ears, but the voice was as loud as ever. It was like, rather than rattling in his eardrums, it was rattling directly inside his brain.

You hate humans. Abhor them. Despise them. Detest them.

“Who are you?” Naoki asked.

But the only reply he received was loud, echoing laughter.



Chapter 7

KIBOU

—Hope—

1

Takuro opened his eyes, jolted awake by the sound of his own screaming. Breathing heavily, he sat up in bed. The sheets were soaked. He put a hand to his brow. He was pouring sweat. He must've been having a terrible dream, but the terror was all he could remember. Not that he wanted to recall anything else, however.

I'm glad it was just a dream...

He breathed a sigh of relief, tugging at his shirt. After calming down some, he looked around. He knew exactly where he was, for he was quite familiar with the school clinic. But he didn't see the nurse anywhere.

What am I doing here? Was I so tired that I just needed to crash for a bit? Or did I get knocked out during soccer practice or something? Or...

Flipping through his memories, the entire back of his head began aching badly enough that he unwittingly groaned. It was almost like his brain was refusing to remember.

Stepping out of bed, Takuro instantly felt dizzy. He quickly extended his right arm and grabbed hold of the nurse's desk to steady himself. There was a pair of scissors lying out, and as misfortune would have it, he just so happened to catch the edge of them when he threw out his hand.

"Ow!"

His face twisted in pain, and he instantly recoiled. He looked at his hand to find not blood, but some sort of blue liquid welling up on his fingertip.

"Oh..."

The moment he saw it, the temporarily fried circuits in his brain resumed normal function, flushing a fresh wave of the nightmare he'd been living through his mind. A blue, man-eating monster. His transformation. And Naoki's plan for vengeance after being bullied to death.

It wasn't a dream at all... It was all real.

“Takuro... Are you okay?”

He heard a quivering voice from the door to the room and looked over. It was Mika, holding a towel and a wash basin full of fresh water. She must have been taking care of him while he was sweating and moaning in his sleep.

“Yeah. Sorry I worried you,” he answered, putting a hand on Mika’s shoulder.

Her eyes teared up, and she buried her face in his chest. As he stroked her soft hair, he felt strangely calm.

“What are you doing here? Didn’t Hiroshi tell you guys to wait outside?”

“It’s bad, Takuro. We heard Panzee screaming, and then Kazuya ran inside...”

Takuro recalled Naoki’s grim expression upon seeing Mr. Inoue.

Naoki, you didn’t...

Takuro looked up at the clock on the wall. It was just after seven. Fortunately, he’d only been out for less than ten minutes.

“Where are Hiroshi and Takeshi?” he asked.

“They’re looking for Kazuya,” Mika answered.

Takuro knew he couldn’t afford to stay put. He grabbed his jacket hanging over the back of the folding chair by the bed.

“I’ve gotta stop this rampage of his.”

He quickly slid his arms through the sleeves, biting his lip.

This is all on me. I’ve got to be the one to do something about it.

“Mika, you—”

“I’m coming with you,” Mika cut him off and clasped his hand tightly. “Till death do us part.”

She looked him dead in the eye, and Takuro couldn’t see even a flicker of hesitation within her.

“...Yeah.”

He nodded slightly.

It's not like I can live a normal life now. Not with this body... If trading my life to stop Naoki will save everyone else, I thought that would be for the best, but...

"Let's go."

Takuro then left the nurse's office, still holding Mika's hand.

No matter what happens, I won't let go of her.

2

His ears on high alert, Takuro ascended the stairs with Mika at his side. Other than the buzzing of the old fluorescent bulbs, he couldn't hear a thing. Where had the others gone?

Upon reaching the second floor, the faint scent of blood wafted past his nose. Takuro was immediately struck with a bad feeling. Mika must have picked up on the smell too. Her grip on his hand tightened. But as terrible as it might be, they needed to know what had happened.

Checking each room one by one, Takuro and Mika proceeded down the hall. They passed the student council room and the AV room. Further ahead were the music room, the computer lab, and the home ec room, which was divided into a sewing workshop and a kitchen area. After seeing that no one was in the music room, the couple moved on. They peered through the window into the sewing workshop, but still nothing seemed to be amiss. Takuro took a step with his right leg to head for the kitchen, when...

"Hey, don't you think there's something weird about that mannequin?" Mika asked, tugging on his arm.

"Huh?"

He turned back to the window she was pointing toward. On the other side of a table with a sewing machine on it were three full-sized mannequins. Two of them were the normal kind you'd often see in stores, but the last one was slightly different.

Rather than a mannequin, it was more like a large wooden doll. It had articulate joints so that it could be styled freely, but it had something of a

deformed design. Its torso had no discernible waist, making it impossible to tell where the chest ended and the hips began. Its head was entirely spherical as well, with only two bored holes where eyes would go.

It certainly looked odd upon closer inspection, but it wasn't strange enough that anyone would give it a second passing glance. Takuro for one had never paid attention to the mannequins in the sewing workshop, so it wasn't like he could say even if something was weird here. But this one... Takuro recognized this mannequin.

"That mannequin... It was in the Jailhouse, wasn't it?"

He nodded silently in response to Mika's question, a bead of cold sweat dripping down his temple. She was exactly right. Takuro had seen that doll-like form many times in the Jailhouse, both virtual and otherwise. It was an item that played an important role in Shun's escape game.

"Do you think we've been trapped inside another world that's synchronized with the game?"

"Correct! Very astute," said Naoki from behind them.

Takuro immediately stepped in front of Mika to protect her as he faced off against Naoki.

"Remember what I said at the very beginning? 'Welcome to the Jailhouse.' Once I installed Shun's escape game on the school's mainframe, voila. So right now, we're back in the game. Well? Isn't it fun to be enjoying a little leisure at school?"

Naoki sounded delighted, but Takuro was in no mood for his ramblings.

"Where's Panzee?" he demanded with a glare.

"He's been dead for a while now," Naoki answered, nodding down the hall.

Takuro could feel Mika trembling behind him.

"Why? Why did you have to kill someone else?" Takuro asked, making sure to stay in front of Mika. "It's me you really hate, right? This doesn't involve anyone else, so if you're going to kill someone, kill me."

"My, I'm shocked. I never thought I'd live to hear those words come out of

your mouth. Oh, wait..." Naoki said in a joking manner, pursing his lips. "So I'm supposed to believe you've become a goody two-shoes or something? Can people really change that easily, I wonder?"

"My friends..."

The faces of everyone he'd fought to survive alongside in the Jailhouse flashed through Takuro's mind.

"My friends changed me," he answered, bolstered by Mika's warmth as she leaned on his back.

"Oh, they're your friends, huh?" Naoki said with a frosty stare. "Too bad one of them's already dead."

There, Naoki lifted his right arm, revealing his shirt stained blue.

"You didn't—"

"See for yourself."

Naoki pointed toward the adjacent kitchen space. Mika was faster than Takuro, and instantly darted over to the door. Peering through the window, however, all the color ran from her face.

"Mika, don't run off! Stay behind me!"

Takuro quickly followed after Mika, keeping himself between her and Naoki. But when he approached the door too, a familiar face leaped out at him. On the gas stove was a large aluminum pot. Right next to it, on the kitchen counter, lay Takeshi. By his head was a carelessly placed cookbook.

"What... What do you think you're doing?" Takuro turned and asked Naoki.

"I've never eaten a human before, and it seems I just don't have the stomach for them raw, so..." Naoki said quite indifferently.

"You..."

Takuro knew he couldn't afford to lose his cool. But despite his best efforts to remind himself that, his voice quivered with rage.

"Ah, yes, that's it. I really can't get enough of it. It just sends shivers up my spine. I never did get to see that look on your face while I was alive, after all."

His eyes fixed on Takuro, Naoki continued in a sharper tone, "You asked me earlier why I had to kill someone else. Well, let me explain it. It's because my anger won't be sated just by torturing and killing you alone."

The harsher Naoki's tone grew, the colder the air in the room turned from the tension.

"So I'm going to kill everyone you care about to plunge you into the darkest depths of despair first."

There, something overtook the rage in Takuro's heart. It was fear. He was starting to freak out. His knees wobbled, and he began to sweat profusely. He did his best to stay strong in front of Mika, but his teeth were still chattering. Takuro had never been on the receiving end of such pure, pointed hatred before. It chilled him to the bone.

"Don't... Please." Takuro got down on his knees and bowed his head.

"Are you seriously begging? Now *this* is a real shocker. I had no idea you were even capable." Takuro could hear Naoki laugh. "I remember all the times you made me beg for mercy. Of course, I didn't want to be hurt, so I did what I was told. But *this* is the mercy you showed me!"

The impact rattled Takuro's brainpan. His forehead hit the floor with a thud. The next thing he knew, Naoki was stepping on his head.

"That's just cruel! Stop it!" he heard Mika shout.

"Cruel? You want to lecture me about cruel? I seem to remember you laughing from the sidelines," Naoki hissed, ruthlessly grinding his foot into Takuro's head.

"Please! Just stop!"

"Mika, be quiet!" Takuro shouted.

It was dangerous to provoke Naoki. There was no telling when he might turn his anger on her.

Besides... this is what I deserve.

Takuro's skull shuddered and creaked from the strain. If he continued to offer no resistance, Naoki would surely splatter his brains right there on the floor. A

pitiful way to go.

But if this is how it has to be, then so be it, he thought, resigning himself to his fate. *I did way worse to Naoki for way longer.*

“Please! That’s enough!”

As Mika’s grief-filled scream reached Takuro’s ears, the weight on his head suddenly lifted. He looked up to see Naoki bowled over in the hallway. Mika must have pushed him.

Fearing a counterattack, Takuro quickly got to his feet and positioned himself between Mika and Naoki once more. Naoki, however, stood up lazily. Brushing the dust from his clothes, he shrugged his shoulders and looked at them in pity.

“Fine. It would be a shame to just kill you two outright, so in the interest of good fun, let’s have a little wager,” said Naoki as he turned to point to the clock in the room. “It’s currently 7:10 AM, an hour and ten minutes before the school bell rings.”

“What of it?”

“Since I managed to sync the school with Shun’s game, it’d be a waste not to enjoy it, so let’s play. As for the wager... Oh, I know! If you can escape from school before the bell rings, you win. How’s that sound?”

“And if we can’t escape?”

“When the bell rings, the plated doors and windows will all return to normal. Naturally, everyone will then come inside like any other school day, and I certainly doubt they’ll be expecting a man-eating monster waiting for them. I’ll gobble up every last one of them in their surprise,” Naoki said with a gleeful grin. “The odds are stacked against you, but good luck and have fun!”

And with that, Naoki raised his right hand high above his head and skipped off down the hall, humming and waving.

3

The chisel snapped off at the handle, the blade clattering to the floor uselessly.

That makes the seventh one.

Hiroshi sighed and reached out for another chisel.

“What are you doing?” Kazuya asked.

Hiroshi hadn’t noticed him walk over.

“Are you okay now?” he asked, picking up the next chisel.

Kazuya hadn’t said a word while they were running from the science lab to the art room on the third floor. And after making it there, he’d simply sat in the corner hugging his knees, wide-eyed and utterly unresponsive. He’d looked like someone had sucked the soul right out of him.

But Hiroshi could hardly blame him. He’d just witnessed the aftermath of their homeroom teacher’s brutal murder. If anything, Hiroshi was the odd one here for being able to keep his calm.

When he realized that it was pointless to try and talk to Kazuya for the time being, he’d decided to give him his space. Really, he was grateful he hadn’t gone hysterical. This was much easier to deal with than someone who was thrashing about or shouting crazily. And so, leaving Kazuya to his own devices, Hiroshi had gone over to the window.

He hadn’t brought the two of them here by chance. The art room was basically in the middle of the third floor, and as such, it was outfitted with emergency escape chutes along the windows. Hiroshi’s plan was to use one to get out.

His first thought had been to go immediately to the window in the boys’ bathroom that Kazuya and Mika had used to get in, but Takuro was asleep in the nurse’s office practically next door. He knew he’d be putting his unconscious friend in danger if he led the monster that way, so he’d chosen plan B: the art room.

After finding one of the boxes labeled “emergency chute,” Hiroshi carefully opened it. Luckily, he’d gone through safety training and knew exactly how to use it. Now if he could just get one of the windows open, they could escape outside.

Next, he'd taken a moment to inspect the metal plates covering the windows. They looked like they could be removed by hand, but when he grabbed them, they wouldn't budge. They were apparently affixed to the glass somehow, though Hiroshi couldn't find any nails or bolts holding them in place.

The set of chisels was something Hiroshi had found while searching the cabinets in the room. He took one and wedged it between two of the metal plates on the windows. He tried again and again in various ways, employing the process of trial and error, but the only results he had to show for it so far were seven broken chisels.

And the eighth was no different. The blade broke off with a dull snapping sound and fell at Kazuya's feet.

"This appears to be fruitless. I doubt any further attempts will yield favorable results," Hiroshi said, his shoulders lowered in disappointment.

Rubbing his bright red fingers, he then turned to Kazuya and repeated his earlier question.

"Are you okay now?"

"No, not really... I'm still shaking. See?"

Kazuya held his hands out in demonstration. And indeed, his fingertips were quivering slightly.

"You gotta tell me... What in the world is going on here?"

It was a perfectly natural question, but Hiroshi struggled to find an answer. So much had happened that he wasn't even sure where to start. And even if he did manage to explain it all, he doubted Kazuya would ever believe him.

"We have to call an ambulance right away. Panzee's—"

"It's too late. Mr. Inoue is dead."

"Did *he* kill him?" Kazuya asked with great nervous energy. "I wasn't seeing things, was I? That guy in the science lab..."

"Yes, that was Naoki," Hiroshi quietly answered with a modest nod.

"How? I thought he was dead."

“If you define death as the termination of one’s life in their original body, then yes, he’s dead.”

“What are you saying? That was a ghost?”

“Strictly speaking, no, but that may be the easiest way to explain what’s going on here.”

The reality was that it wasn’t just Naoki. Takuro, Mika, Takeshi, and Anna were all dead too, but revealing that now might be too much for Kazuya. Hiroshi couldn’t risk sending him into a panic, and so he kept that detail to himself.

“So, what? A ghost cursed Panzee to death? That... can’t be, can it? Am I dreaming?”

“Overthinking the matter will only confuse you further. For now, let us just focus on escaping. Once we’re outside, I’m sure we’ll awake from this terrible dream,” Hiroshi calmly said.

“I got in here through the window in the boys’ bathroom. I think we can get out that way, too.”

“Indeed. I’m starting to think that may be our only option.” Hiroshi put a hand to his chin when suddenly he saw a figure in the hall. “Hide!”

Pulling Kazuya by the hand, he moved to the rear of the classroom. He threw up a white sheet draped over a set of shelves and hid the two of them under it. And it wasn’t a moment too soon. The next second, he could hear the door to the room burst open.

It was too late now, but Hiroshi was kicking himself for not holding on to one of the chisels. He looked around for anything else he might use as a weapon, but the shelves only housed a few plaster busts. He locked eyes with the leftmost one, which seemed to be looking down on them in concern. It was a bust of Hermes, one of the 12 gods of Olympus, as sculpted by Praxiteles of Athens. Hiroshi recalled reading in a book that Hermes was an expert in many fields and far more knowledgeable than the other gods.

Please help us.

Hiroshi had never prayed before; this was his first time asking for help from a

divine being. Logically, of course, he didn't believe in the existence of gods. That said, he'd lost count of how many times he'd had his mind blown recently. He now knew good and well that there were a great many things in this world that science couldn't explain. And that being the case, he couldn't completely deny that there might be a god out there somewhere.

Next to the statue of Hermes sat busts of two men facing each other. The one on the left was Apollo after the *Apollo Belvedere* statue in the Vatican. The one on the right was Michelangelo's famous bust of Brutus. When his eyes fell upon Brutus, Hiroshi felt an uncanny sense of déjà vu. Just what was going on here...?

Hiroshi reached his hand up for the statue, intent on getting to the bottom of this strange feeling. But no sooner than he did, the white sheet concealing him and Kazuya was ripped away.

"Oh, good. You guys are still okay."

There stood Takuro and Mika, who were both looking quite relieved.

"Thank goodness, Takuro. You're okay now?"

"Yeah. I couldn't stay asleep forever, now could I?"

Takuro was putting on a brave front, but there was an awkward tension in his expression.

"You guys are still okay."

Something about his words nagged at Hiroshi.

"Don't tell me Takeshi's..."

"Yeah... Naoki got him. There was this gaping hole in his temple... It was nasty," Takuro answered, biting his lower lip. "He's insane. He had... Takeshi's body in the kitchen like he was going to cook and eat him."

Takuro was visibly fighting back his rage, but it wasn't Naoki he was angry with. No, he was angry at himself for not being able to save Takeshi. Hiroshi could tell because he felt the same way.

"Naoki said he would spare us all if we managed to escape before the bell," Takuro continued.

“Yeah, but... are you sure we should believe what he said?” Mika asked in concern.

“Believe it or not, his power is well beyond anything we possess. I don’t even think we could beat him if we all ganged up on him. So we’re kind of out of options. Our only choice is to believe him.”

“Um... I’m not sure I follow...” Kazuya, who had only been listening in on the conversation so far, interjected. “We just need to get out of here, right? In that case, the boys’ bathroom on the first floor—”

“Is out of the question,” Takuro said, cutting him off. “That was the first thing we thought of too, but it was a no-go. We checked, and the open window is now covered by a metal plate like all the others. Naoki must have realized the bug and patched it.”

“What bug?” Kazuya asked in bewilderment. “This isn’t some video game.”

“I’m afraid it is,” Hiroshi replied flatly. “We’ve been trapped inside one of Shun’s games again, it seems.”

“So you noticed it too, huh?”

“Yes, though only a few moments ago.”

Hiroshi recalled the strange sense of déjà vu he’d felt upon seeing the busts on the shelf. They were all key items in Shun’s game.

“Yeah, basically the same for us. One of the mannequins in the sewing room was just like the wooden doll from Shun’s game.”

Hiroshi knew instantly what Takuro was talking about. In the game, the doll could be found in the mansion’s parlor. If the player inserted red and blue stones into its eye sockets, the head would come off to reveal a key.

“Then perhaps if we find the stones, we shall be one step closer to escaping.”

“That’s why we came here. The blue stone was hidden in a marble bust, right? So if we break these puppies, we’re bound to find—”

“Hold on a second.” Hiroshi stopped Takuro just as he was about to grab one of the statues. “You played Shun’s game; surely you recall that there was only one statue. In other words, the extras here must be dummies or traps. I imagine

that only one of these busts is actually safe to break. And if we choose the wrong one, it may explode—game over.”

Takuro froze. Before him sat the three busts.

“Which do I break, Hiroshi? I bet you remember.”

“No. The correct bust should be randomized with each playthrough, meaning there’s no single right answer.”

“Then what do we do?”

“In Shun’s game, there was a hint hidden in another room.”

“Do you remember where?”

“The bathroom. If you pulled the plug in the bathtub, the water would drain and reveal a key to the rec room, which contained the password—”

“Great, but there’s no bathtub at school, much less a rec room. We’d waste all day just trying to find their analogues here.”

“Agreed. Considering our time limit, we cannot afford to squander any. Which means our only option is a Hail Mary,” Hiroshi said and picked up the Brutus bust.

“H-Hey, you—”

He could see Takuro freaking out out of the corner of his eye as he hurled the bust at the floor. It didn’t explode, but rather shattered to pieces. A round blue stone rolled out of the marble debris.

“Found it,” Hiroshi announced dryly as he scooped up the stone.

“How did you know...?”

“I could tell something was different about that bust.”

“Explain it in layman’s terms, man.”

“You didn’t see it? Michelangelo’s bust was carved with Brutus facing left, but that one was facing right. That made it obvious it was a fake, presumably placed here later.”

“What? That doesn’t prove anything.”

“Certainly not. That’s why I said it was a Hail Mary.”

“Dude, that was reckless—”

“Of course, I had some confidence in my assumption. Hiding a key item inside a statue facing the wrong way seemed like something Shun would do, after all.”

Hiroshi handed Takuro the stone and stepped away from the shelf, careful to avoid the marble shards on the floor.

“You really are amazing. Always a step ahead of me,” Takuro remarked with a wry smile.

“We haven’t much time. I’ll go with Kazuya, you go with Mika—we need to find the red stone as quickly as possible,” Hiroshi turned around before the door and said.

“No, you and Kazuya are regular humans. If you run into Naoki, you’ll be killed instantly. So I’ll take you, and Mika will guard Kazuya—”

There, Mika tugged on Takuro’s arm. Hiroshi couldn’t help finding them cute.

I can even tell why Mika’s suddenly upset. My, I certainly have grown.

“No, that won’t do,” Hiroshi said. “It’s not like the two of you can stand up to Naoki either, correct? In that sense, we’re the same.”

“No, we’re not. Unlike me and Mika, you two still have a life to live. Don’t throw that away.”

“As far as I’m concerned, the same goes for you.”

“...Yeah right.” Takuro looked away. “But thanks.”

Confused as to why he was being thanked, Hiroshi cocked his head. It was true that he’d grown, but he was still far from completely understanding the human heart.

“You two go and insert the blue stone into the mannequin. We’ll head west from here and go down the stairs to the first floor. Can you two go east and check the second floor?”

“Okay.”

“When you’ve checked every classroom, let’s meet up back here. How does

that sound?"

"Fine by me."

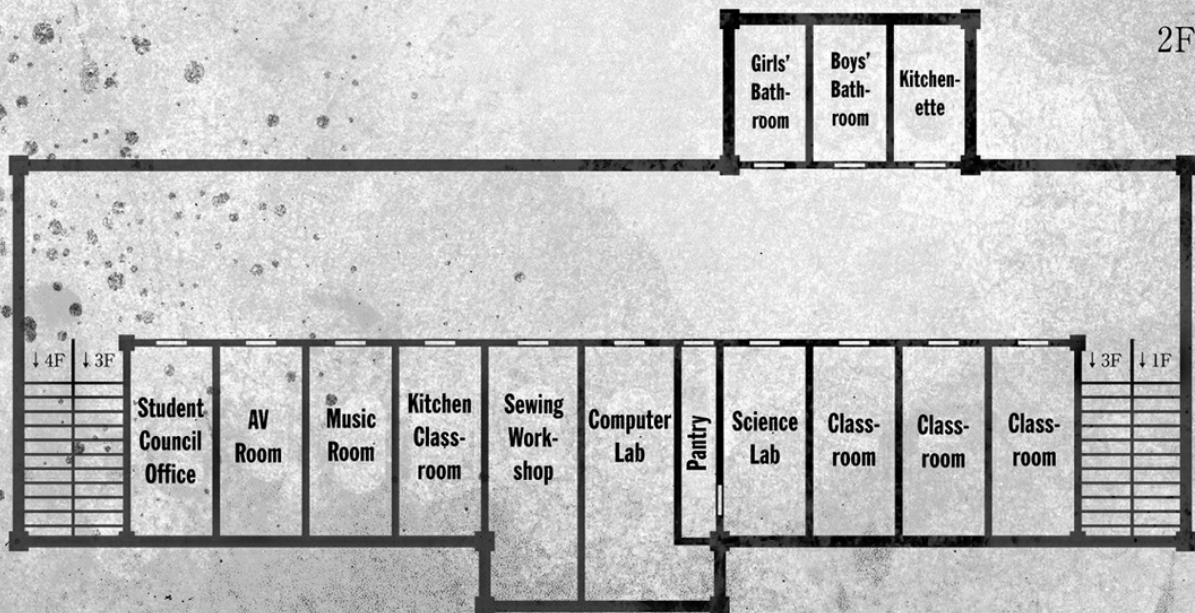
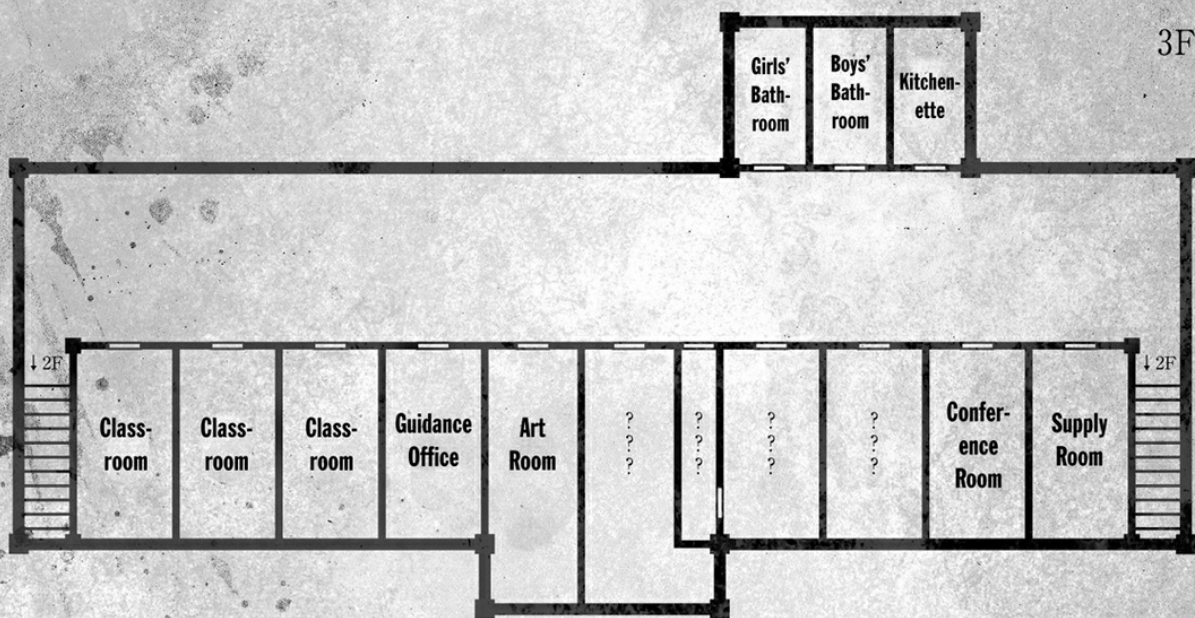
"Then we shall see you soon."

Hiroshi then extended his hand like it was only natural, surprising himself by the gesture. Asking for a handshake was something the Hiroshi of a month ago never would have even considered.

"You better survive," Takuro said, gripping Hiroshi's hand.

"Likewise."

Hiroshi gripped his tightly back. The warmth of Takuro's hand made his chest burn for some reason.





Chapter 8

KIKAI

—Bizarre—

1

It was now 7:20 AM. Quite some time had passed since Kazuya and Mika had run off. A crowd of early birds—three teachers and about 20 students—were now milling about in front of the school. Not one of them had the faintest clue what was going on, causing a spiraling vortex of unease among them.

Anna, stepping away from the crowd, looked up at the school from the courtyard.

Shun...

Her chest ached as if it were clamped by a vice.

“Everyone, calm down. The police will be here soon.”

She heard the husky voice of the gym teacher and looked over. Putting his cellphone back in his slacks pocket, he began patrolling the school grounds. He seemed the most unsettled of all.

The other teachers were behaving similarly, however. They would respond every so often to the students’ questions, but there was an undeniable shallowness to it all. Most likely, they were all doing their best to come up with a way to avoid any possible blame for this.

Meanwhile, the students were making a fuss, though none of them seemed particularly concerned. If anything, they were excited at the prospect of school being closed. They had no idea how grave the situation really was. No, only Anna and Mari had heard Mr. Inoue’s scream.

Yet... even if Mr. Inoue’s body was discovered inside, it probably wouldn’t change anything. Of course, there would be waterworks and some of the students might even be too upset to come to school for a while, but it would all be temporary. Before the week was out, they’d all be back to their everyday lives as if nothing had really happened. Anna was sure of it. It was the same thing they’d done when Naoki passed.

The word “classmate” meant nothing more than a weak, year-long bond. Best friends lost touch once they weren’t in the same class anymore, and within a

few years, they'd even forget each other's faces. These dark thoughts swirled inside Anna, making her feel empty.

"Hey... What do you think's going on?"

Mari came jogging over to join Anna in the courtyard, her face pale.

"Are Kazuya and the others... okay?" she asked, then coughed a few times.

"Are you coming down with something?" Anna put a hand to her warm forehead and asked. "You have a fever. Why didn't you stay home today?"

"Because I have classroom duty..."

"You could've just gotten someone to sub for you. If you stay out here in the freezing cold, you're only going to get sicker. I'll tell the teachers, so you go home—"

"It's okay. I brought some cold medicine with me," Mari said with a smile, pulling some pills out from her uniform pocket to show Anna. "This stuff works great, so I'm sure I'll be feeling better in no time. I'll go take it now."

Mari then turned around and walked over to the outdoor water fountains. Her condition worried Anna, but she couldn't make her go home. Even if she did, she would probably be too worried about what was going on at school to get any rest. Anna, too, wasn't about to move until she saw Shun and the others back safe and sound.

But that train of thought was suddenly interrupted by a strange moaning that reached her ears. She quickly whipped around and saw Mari on the ground in front of the water fountains.

"Mari!"

She hurried over and saw that water was still flowing from the fountain. She must have collapsed while getting a drink.

"Stay with me!"

Anna put a hand on Mari's shoulder. She was spasming like a fish out of water. She then coughed violently, a thick, blue liquid spilling from her mouth.

"Someone! Someone help!" Anna nearly screamed.

A light, leftward twist of the handle caused water to come rushing out of the faucet. Naoki repeatedly rinsed his face, not even caring about the water he was splashing on his uniform. He simply continued to douse himself in the cold liquid.

The third-floor boys' bathroom. Every so often, this had been the site of his cruel bullying. The dent the back of his head had left in the second-stall door when Takuro punched him one day was still there and everything. Naoki shook his head again and again as those memories he'd tried so hard to suppress threatened to resurface, fresh and raw.

He then looked up, meeting his own gaze in the mirror. He hadn't actually seen himself since the accident, so his reflection came as quite a surprise. He touched his cheek, and his mirror image did the same. His heart danced over such a natural reaction. As a ghost, he'd felt as ethereal as he'd looked, as if he existed only in the liminal brink between dream and reality. Perhaps that was how he'd been able to be so inhuman.

But things were different now. This felt real. No, it was real. He felt pain when he was punched; tears would overflow his eyes when he cried. Naoki's gaze dropped down to his palms. Blue fluid still flecked his skin. Takeshi's blood, to be more precise.

Takeshi's sigh... His moaning.... His body, growing steadily colder...

This made four times now that Naoki had watched Takeshi die. The previous three when a monster had killed him, he'd felt nothing. But, indeed, things were different now.

Am I... scared of everyone dying?

"Pathetic," a strange voice said.

Unlike the vague one he'd heard in the library, Naoki was quite sure this one was real.

"Who's there?"

He quickly jumped back against the wall and looked around, but couldn't

sense anyone.

“And here I thought you’d grown a little more reliable. What a disappointment.”

Yet that voice was unmistakably close.

“Here. Over here. Look in the mirror.”

Naoki turned as the voice beckoned, and there in the mirror—just like before—was his sad reflection.

“Understand now?”

The Naoki in the mirror smiled. Shocked, he touched his face. His reflection did the same, still smiling.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice raspy. “What are you doing with my body? Stop it! Get out!”

His reflection yelled and ranted right back at him.

It’s not an illusion. No, that’s definitely me in the mirror. Does that mean the thing talking to me... is also me?

Seeing his confusion, the Naoki in the mirror spoke up with a chuckle.

“Well, aren’t you shameless? You’re the one who entered *my* body.”

Hearing those words, he finally understood. The voice he was hearing belonged not to him, but the monster that had eaten him—the monster that had been imprisoned beneath the Jailhouse for 20 years. And the moment he realized that, as if a dam had suddenly burst, the monster’s memories flooded his mind.

“Why?”

A young girl was crying.

“Why is everyone so mean to me? They call you and Daddy heretics and throw rocks at me. Please, Mommy... What’s a heretic? Are you and Daddy bad people?”

The girl’s entire life flashed by him like a movie on constant fast-forward.

“Tell me, Mommy,” the girl asked, clinging to her mother in a dark and cold basement. “The village chief told me to destroy the ‘hideous eyeball’ in our house if we wanted to live in peace. He was very insistent... But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t hurt God. But then he said it’s ‘that demon’s fault’ the river flooded. Is that true?”

The girl’s mother remained silent as she lovingly stroked her daughter’s hair. Her hands were torn up, and there were traces of blood underneath her cracked fingernails. Bruised and battered, her arms were so thin they were practically skeletal. It seemed they believed in a different god than the people around them—and for that, they were persecuted.

“That village was hell,” the Naoki in the mirror said in a bitter tone. “On my ninth birthday, my little sister was kidnapped and brutalized by the villagers. Luckily, she survived. But that was when we realized we’d all be killed if we stayed any longer, and so we decided to flee.”

Relying on an antiques dealer her father had met in the village, the family made plans to escape. As poor as they were, the best they could do was hide in a shipping container and stow away on a ship. They knew they’d be severely punished if discovered. The very shadow of every shipmate that walked by frightened them, and they spent most of the trip starving, but they told each other that it was still better than where they’d come from. And eventually, the ship and its cargo made it to Japan.

“The house we got to stay in here wasn’t drafty. The beds were warm and soft. The food was delicious. Life was more peaceful than I could have ever imagined. Every day was pure bliss. The housekeeper, Saya, was strict, and I didn’t like her much, but all the same, it was quite clear that she cared for us.” She continued to speak without stopping for air. “I was so happy that it scared me. I knew those days could never last. That greater misfortune would sooner or later befall us. And as it turns out, I was right.”

The wooden box she’d found in the basement. The indigo bugs inside it. The creepy way they started moving once they soaked in water. And the terrible things she felt when she accidentally swallowed one.

“Finally... Free... Humans... Revenge... Free... Humans... Revenge...”

The insect grew inside her, fusing with her. Her body swelled horribly, and her skin turned a dark shade of blue.

“Humans... Revenge... Revenge... Revenge...”

She still had no idea what those bugs were, but the intense hatred that welled inside her was plain as day.

“Stop it... Why... Why would you be so cruel...”

The image of her mother clutching the bloody body of the girl’s twin sister then flickered repeatedly inside Naoki’s head.

“Please... don’t kill me...”

A splash of bright red blood. Then there were two unmoving bodies, their eyes rolled into the backs of their skulls.

“Mommy?”

The little girl shook them, but they would never stir again.

“No... Why?”

Overtaken by the animosity overflowing from the insect inside her, the girl had lashed out and killed her beloved mother and little sister. Naturally, her father blamed her.

“It wasn’t me! It was the bug inside me! Please, help me! Help me, Daddy!”

The girl desperately begged her father for help, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. He just locked her in the basement.

“Why...? Why is this happening to me?”

Every day, she banged on the metal doors keeping her prisoner. The skin on her hands was cut to ribbons, and blue blood stained the floor. And day after day after day passed that way. Eventually, her humanity faded, that ever-growing hatred welling up in its place.

“I hate them... Those humans who persecuted us... me... as a heretic. I’ll kill them... I’ll kill them all.”

The animus washed over Naoki like a tidal wave, drowning out all of his other thoughts. If he let his guard down, it might swallow him up entirely. He grit his

teeth and desperately swam against the current of the grudge.

“Why do you resist?” his reflection asked, glaring at him with sharp eyes. “You hate everyone too, don’t you? You want to kill them all. Every last one. So there’s no need to hold back.”

She was right. But...

“Naoki... I’m sorry. If we could start over, do you think this time—”

Takeshi’s last words flashed through his mind.

“I’m disappointed. Do you still not understand?”

Naoki didn’t have to say a word for her to know what he was thinking.

“I’ve never seen anything so selfish as humans. And that boy was no different—he was so afraid of death that he said things he didn’t mean. You’ve been tricked so many times before, yet you’d still believe him? You’re too naive.”

Naoki nodded. What she was saying was right.

Considering what he’s done to me in the past, there should be no way I could ever forgive him.

“Don’t waste this chance you’ve been given,” the girl suddenly urged him.

Confused by what she meant, Naoki cocked his head to the side.

“You beheld the sight of the grand being that watches over us, didn’t you?” she asked, seemingly referring to the creepy eye statue from the Jailhouse.

“What are you talking about?”

“You saved me from my 20-year imprisonment in that basement. You, who has nursed an unfulfilled need for vengeance, and me, who has spent almost my entire life hating humans from the depths of a jail cell... Do you really think it’s mere coincidence that the two of us should come together?” She continued loquaciously, “I’m grateful to you, really. I prayed constantly to be free of that cell, but my prayers went unanswered, day in and day out. I was on the verge of hating God for testing me so. But now I understand... God was waiting for the similar paths we were walking to converge.”

“Yeah, no,” Naoki quickly refuted. “I saved you of my own volition. I wasn’t

following the will of some eyeball.”

“Oh, no. You simply don’t understand. It was *all* God’s will. How else could it be that your friend’s game lined up so perfectly with the Jailhouse?”

Naoki was at a loss for words.

“I believe that the Jailhouse transformed because you wished so dearly for retribution on those who murdered you, over and over. And God granted your wish.”

“Why would he ignore the prayers of a believer and instead help the spirit of someone who just happened to die nearby?”

“God is fickle. Or perhaps just strange... In either case, I urge you to get your vengeance before the object of God’s fancy shifts.”

“...”

“Now, it’s about time for the students to be arriving at school. Soon we will watch them all suffer. I can’t wait.”

“How are we going to kill them?”

“You’ve finally come around, then?” She nodded, satisfied. “Let us head to the roof.”

3

After sweeping the eastern half of the third floor, Takuro and Mika descended once again to the second floor. Kicking in classroom door after classroom door, they split up the work of searching for the red stone. Having recently played Shun’s escape game, Takuro focused on looking where he thought Shun was likely to have left hints... but so far had come up empty-handed.

The clock on the wall now read 7:40 AM. They only had 40 minutes left before the school bell rang. Time was passing too quickly for what little they had to show for it, and Takuro was starting to panic. Burning with motivation, he kicked in the next door and reentered the sewing workshop where they’d encountered Naoki earlier. The creepy mannequin was still standing there unchanged.

First, he tried inserting the blue stone from the art room into the mannequin's right eye. The socket practically swallowed the stone, which fit snugly into the hole like they were made for each other. There was no longer any doubt in Takuro's mind that these would be key items in their escape. And since it was hard to imagine that the other eye would be in the same room as the mannequin, Takuro didn't want to bother wasting any time searching the rest of the sewing workshop. He turned to head back into the hall when Mika tugged on his arm.

"Look, Takuro. Isn't that a wedding dress?"

She was pointing to a headless mannequin next to the lectern, outfitted in a gorgeous dress of pure white.

"What's something like this doing at school?" she asked, walking over to it and studying it with intense curiosity.

"The sewing club held a fashion show for the school festival, right? Maybe they made it for that."

"A fashion show? We had one of those? I'm surprised you knew anything about that, Takuro."

"Well, uh..."

"What's the matter? Was one of the models a cute girl?"

"Idiot. Of course not."

"Oh, what's this? You seem awfully rattled. Did I hit the nail on the head?"

"No, now stop screwing around."

But Mika was right. Takuro had been interested in an underclassman at the time, but that was all in the past. Mika was all he could think about now.

"Still, what's it doing here? Are they going to have another fashion show before graduation or something?"

He quickly tried to change the subject, even though it seemed unlike him even to himself.

"Hey, Takuro..." Mika said softly, her eyes still on the wedding dress.

“What?” he asked curtly, feeling guilty.

“Listen...”

Mika’s luscious lips parted slightly. Takuro was afraid she was going to ask him more about the other girl, but he was quite wrong.

“If we do manage to get out of here, what are we going to do then?”

“What? Well...” Takuro trailed off.

We’re not people. We’re man-eating monsters. We have more control over our bodies now, but there’s still the risk that one of us might suddenly go on a rampage at any time. There’s no way we can live in normal society pretending to be human.

“Mika...” Wrapping his arms around her, Takuro continued, “Let’s find somewhere secluded where we can live alone together... just the two of us.”

Even if they were inhumanly strong, it would undoubtedly be difficult for them to make it on their own. And yet, Takuro was sure that if he had Mika by his side, everything would be fine. They could overcome any obstacle as long as they were together.

“I’ll never let you go.”

This wasn’t the first time he’d said those words to her. He’d fed her similar lines countless times before. Knowing what a weapon kind words could be, he’d easily lied over and over. But things were different now.

He cursed his past self for thinking of other people as mere pawns in some game of his. Yet despite all the times he’d betrayed her, Mika still believed in him. He rued his foolish pride. For without Mika, he knew he would have been dead ages ago.

That’s right... Mika changed me. I’m never going to let her go.

This time, there was no hint of falsehood in those words. They’d surfaced from his heart as naturally as blood pumped through his veins.

“So let’s live together, working together for our happiness.”

“Okay...” Mika replied meekly, nodding her head resting on his chest.

“It’ll be okay. I’m sure everything’ll turn out fine.”

“Yeah.”

“Till death do us part.”

“Thank you, Takuro...” Mika whimpered, tears spilling from her eyes.

“Quit crying, stupid,” Takuro teased with a smile, gently wiping her wet eyelids with his index finger.

“But...”

“You’re usually so strong. This isn’t like you.”

“I know...”

Mika wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand and then took a step back and to the side, standing behind the mannequin with the wedding dress and holding her head over its shoulders.

“Well? Do I look good?” she asked sheepishly.

“Y-Yeah...”

Takuro nodded, his mouth completely agape. Mika looked so much more adult than she usually did that it took his breath away. He then pictured her actually in the dress. He knew she would never get the chance to wear anything like it, which was exactly why he couldn’t help letting his imagination run wild.



“You’re beautiful, Mika.”

“Thanks, Takuro. Maybe one day—”

Before she could finish her sentence, a look of anguish overtook Mika’s face. Groaning, she suddenly pitched forward, knocking the mannequin in the dress onto its side.

“Mika?!”

Takuro rushed to her side. For a moment, he couldn’t understand what was happening. There was a sticky, translucent substance wrapped around Mika’s upper body. It wriggled like it was alive, ejecting blue liquid all over her.

“It’s hot! Help... Help me, Takuro!”

Gray smoke began to rise from Mika’s porcelain skin. Seeing it reminded Takuro of the blue cockroaches he’d encountered in the Jailhouse. This amoeba-like creature appeared to be excreting a similar acid from within its body.

“Stop it!” he roared.

But the monster showed no signs of complying. There was no telling if it could even hear him.

“Get off of Mika!”

He scratched at the mollusk-like creature. Suddenly, eyes began opening all over its sticky body. He’d never seen anything more grotesque. The eyes all focused in on Takuro, glaring at him with malice.

“Wh-What is this?”

“Ahhhhh!”

Mika screamed out in pain. She sounded like she was dying. Takuro bent over her, trying his best to peel the giant amoeba off of her. But no matter how hard he grabbed it, its gooey body would change form and slip through his fingers. There was simply no way to get a hold of it.

“Damn it! What the hell is this?”

As Takuro continued his fruitless battle, he heard a disgusting squelching

sound from behind him. He turned and saw another one of the creatures stuck to Mika's leg.

Where the hell are they coming from?

Sensing something terrible, Takuro fearfully looked up.

"...!"

He was dumbstruck by the sight. Multiple amoebas were clustered together on the ceiling. Their entire bodies pulsed as they each crawled in different directions. Countless eyes swiveled about busily, as if searching for something. It was like something straight out of a nightmare.

"Aaahhhhhhhh!"

Mika's piercing scream ripped through the air. Takuro quickly turned back to her, but it was too late. The sounds of her sizzling flesh, bubbling muscles, and horrific screams came together in a gruesome orchestra of pain.

"NOOOOOOOOO!"

The grand finale was Takuro's aggrieved cry, reverberating helplessly inside the sewing workshop.



Chapter 9

KIRETSU

—Crack—

1

Following the monster's orders, Naoki made his way to the roof. The bright light of the morning sun made him squint. He could hear the restless murmuring coming from the courtyard below. It sounded like plenty of students had already arrived at school, though he couldn't see any of them just yet.

"Get up on the water tower," said the girl who'd swallowed a blue bug almost 20 years ago—the monster Naoki now shared a body with.

Toward the back of the roof sat the several-meter-high water tower that supplied the whole school with water.

What does she think is up there?

Naoki cocked his head quizzically as he ascended the ladder of the cylindrical tower. It didn't take him long to reach the top. It was the highest point on campus. Standing on it, he could see the whole town. On a clear day like today, he could even see the mountains in the distance.

Naoki had lived in this town his entire life. To the west he could even see a particularly tall building—the hospital where he'd been born. It had been a rough delivery, and apparently his mother was forced to suffer through 50 hours of labor after her contractions first began. In the garden behind the hospital stood a great sawtooth oak tree. His mother had named him after that tree, spelling his name with the characters for "straight" and "tree" in hopes of him growing up to be upright.

To the south, he could see the train station. Naoki had loved trains for as long as he could remember, possibly even longer. He could remember always begging his mother to take him to see them there. There was also the swimming school he'd gone to since kindergarten and the elementary school where he'd kept a perfect attendance record for six straight years. There was also the park where he'd run and hide after his father's yelling reduced him to tears, the hobby shop he'd frequently visited in search of his next train model...

Various memories resurfaced as he looked out over the town. It was like he could see his entire 14 years in the scenery. But the girl's next command

snapped him back to reality.

“Look inside the water tower.”

The top of the water tower was sealed with a sturdy-looking lid. It wouldn't be easy to pry open, but it was warped toward the lip, which created just enough of a gap for him to peer through. Naoki stooped down, leaned in, and took a look.

“...!”

The horrific sight was like nothing he could have imagined. Blue grasshopper-like insects were swimming through the water, wriggling their bodies. There were over a hundred—no, there were easily over a thousand of them. And that was just what Naoki could see on the surface. There could be even more teeming below. Something about them was familiar, too. They looked similar to the insects that had scattered across the floor when he tossed the wooden box he'd found in his pocket.

“Oh...”

Was that it? Weren't these just like the insects the girl had swallowed 20 years ago?

“That's right,” the girl happily replied, reading his mind. “These are the insects that were sealed in the basement of my home, the Jailhouse. I knew we'd need them, so I grabbed the box while we were leaving. I'm in complete control in monster form, so you probably don't remember anything about that.”

“So, what? You dumped the contents of the box in here?”

“Yes, right after we arrived here from the mountains. After absorbing some water, they returned to life and multiplied almost instantly. The newborn insects are so small you can't see them, so I have no idea how many there are exactly.”

“...”

“What do you think would happen if you drank this water? No, you wouldn't even have to drink it. The insects can enter through the skin too, apparently. I wonder what would happen if I splashed this on someone... I can't wait to find

out.”

The girl’s chuckle bubbled out from Naoki’s mouth.

“Are you telling me the thing that killed Panzee was...?” he asked, recalling the translucent monster that had suddenly appeared in the science lab.

“After he changed the water in the tank, the amoebas became monsterized. I doubt that teacher ever expected to be killed by his own research subjects.” She continued cheerfully, “But it was probably for the best that he died so soon, don’t you think? Otherwise he’d have to witness the nightmare that’s swiftly approaching.”

“What are you planning?”

“I changed the game a bit.”

“Huh?”

“Originally there was an escape chute on the top floor you could use to clear the game, right? But that’s too boring, so I did a little reprogramming and made it so that the button to release the chute will also destroy the water tower and douse the students below. Everyone bathed in this blue water will transform into monsters like me. Will that merry band be able to live with themselves when they realize the horrors they’ve unleashed upon their own classmates?”

Naoki’s gaze shifted to the courtyard, the girl’s laughter echoing in his ears. Students were continuing to gather in the courtyard. They were all so captivated by the buzz of what was going on around school that they didn’t even realize he was up on the roof looking down at them.

“When the water tower is destroyed, everyone down there will be turned into a monster?”

“That’s right. I can’t wait.”

“But that includes people who have nothing to do with this. I only wanted to exact vengeance on my classmates—”

“That might be what you want, but not me,” the girl said, her tone hardening. “Every last human deserves to be wiped off the face of this planet.”

Her pitch-black emotions ate away at Naoki’s heart.

"I need your hate to fester even more. If you keep waffling, salvation will elude you. You want to find peace, don't you? Then hate! Hate more!"

Memories of being bullied came flooding back to Naoki. It was probably her work. She must have learned how to control his emotions.

Hate... Hate humans...

He started seeing red.

Kill... Kill... Kill them all...

His brain was numb. He felt like he was losing himself.

Help me...

A scream escaped his lips.

I... I... didn't want this...

But his shouts were swallowed by black mist, leaving only a murderous rage behind.

2

A stout safe in the principal's office required a four-digit code to unlock. Squatting in front of it, Hiroshi quickly punched a few buttons on the ten-key pad. Using the numbers written on the piano in the music room and the cypher written on the blackboard in the guidance counselor's office, he'd already cracked the code. With a low beep, the heavy door opened. Inside the safe was an ancient brass key, rusted from lack of care and use.

"Doesn't look like there's anything else. Let's move on to the next classroom."

Inserting the key into his pocket, Hiroshi quickly stood up. There wasn't much time left. They couldn't afford to dilly-dally.

"You really are something else, Hiroshi," Kazuya said, impressed.

"How so?" Hiroshi asked as they proceeded quickly down the hall, leaving the principal's office behind.

The only place left to search was the west side of the first floor. A set of

concrete stairs next to the school entrance there allowed them to descend belowground where all the spare furniture was kept. His mind set on finding this storehouse, Hiroshi casually listened to Kazuya with one ear as they walked.

“I mean, you’re so calm despite this crazy situation. And you move so smartly, it’s almost like you already know everything.”

“Oh, about that—”

Hiroshi swallowed the rest of his sentence. Shun’s game had prepared him for all of the obstacles to be found within the school. They’d come from the Jailhouse, after all. It was only natural that they were all passé to him now. But even if he tried explaining that to Kazuya, it would be hard to convince him it was true. And as things stood, they didn’t have a second to waste.

“It’s thanks to Shun. He taught me all the secrets to beating escape games, which has been surprisingly helpful.”

He was hoping Kazuya would buy it, though it wasn’t exactly a lie. It was only thanks to Shun’s help that he’d been able to avoid a game over for so long. But this time, he didn’t have Shun’s help. They had no way of contacting him, making it impossible to even get his advice.

Shun...

Hiroshi’s chest suddenly tightened.

Please be safe.

He could only hope.

“I should say, however, that you have one thing wrong,” Hiroshi clarified as he searched the key ring he’d taken from the teacher’s lounge for the key to the storehouse. “You said I’m completely calm, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. I’m not calm in the least.”

Perhaps before, Hiroshi would have been able to stay calm even in the face of much worse horrors. But things were different now. His mind began panicking when he so much as thought of the captive Shun, preventing him from making logical decisions. And it wasn’t just Shun, either. Hiroshi was deeply troubled by the news of Takeshi’s death. And even now, he was worried for Takuro and

Mika's safety. There was no telling when Naoki might attack. So despite the situation demanding the utmost of his focus, he could scarcely concentrate.

"At some point, I became a complete coward. I wonder why..." Hiroshi muttered as he cocked his head quizzically.

For some reason, he couldn't find the storehouse key on the key ring. Mostly he'd been talking to himself, however...

"I don't think that's true," Kazuya stood before him and said.

"Huh?"

Hiroshi's hands fell idle as he looked up at Kazuya.

"Before, whenever something caught your interest, you became absorbed, unable to see anything else. It always made you seem so unreliable... But watching you today, I've been thinking something was different. Now I think I finally get it... Yeah, that's what it is, huh?"

"Kindly enlighten me with your hypothesis. I'm afraid I'm not following."

"You're not a coward at all. No, you've just got something important to you now. It's normal to be nervous about losing it, you know? And that doesn't make you a coward. Cowards are people who abandon what's important to them just to save their own skin."

Hiroshi cocked his head. The meaning of Kazuya's abstract words eluded him.

"You know how an earwig will protect its eggs with its life, even giving up its body so that the newly-hatched larvae can feed? Humans are the same. When you have someone you want to protect, that's when you really show your strength."

There, a familiar voice cut into their conversation.

"Chatting about bugs while your classmates' lives are in danger? Are you two even taking this seriously?"

Hiroshi whipped around when he heard it.

"What are you doing here? There's not much time left."

Atop the stairs stood Naoki, a giant grin on his face. Hiroshi's whole body

went stiff for a moment as if he'd been struck by lightning. He then quickly jumped back, pressing his back against the wall. His eyes were wide, observing Naoki's every move.

I'm scared, he honestly thought.

This was yet another emotion that never would have surfaced in him before, but now the bottomless fear he felt made his knees buckle. Naoki had sent Takuro flying earlier. A single flick of his finger would paralyze or even kill Hiroshi or Kazuya.

"You show real strength when you have someone you want to protect? That's just stupid. Humans are as simple as insects. You only care about yourselves above all else."

"That's not—"

Kazuya opened his mouth to retort, but Hiroshi cut him off with his right hand. He may have seen Mr. Inoue's gruesome end, but Kazuya had no idea just how scary Naoki could be. They couldn't risk provoking him.

"What? Was there something wrong with what I said?"

Naoki smiled as he leaned against the wall, yet his eyes were as cold and hard as steel.

"Kazuya," his slightly pale blue lips called. "Tell me this, then. You knew I was being bullied, didn't you? So why didn't you help me?"

Hiroshi could see Kazuya's expression tense. His small Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"And don't try and play dumb. I know you happened to pass by one day while Takuro was having fun with his little 'experiments.' I don't know what you were doing around when literally no one ever went there, but as soon as you saw me, you hid. Takuro and his gang were too focused on bullying me to notice you, but I saw you. I saw you with my poor, desperate, pleading eyes."

"..."

"In that moment, I felt a slight spark of hope. I thought maybe you'd come to help me. But I was dead wrong. Of course not. *Why would* you help me? If you

stuck your nose where it didn't belong, you'd just end up the next victim. Which brings me back to my point: people only care about themselves. But I don't blame you for that, so don't be so twitchy."

Suddenly, Naoki's expression changed. His cold eyes sharpened into a piercing glare.

"What I can't forgive is what happened after. Everyone started avoiding me," he spat hotly. "It's not like I had any great friends in class, but even the people who'd been kind to me suddenly refused to so much as interact with me. I was always alone during recess unless Takuro wanted me. And I have to say, I think that hurt worse than being hit. I mean, how would you feel if everyone treated you like you were invisible?"

Naoki clutched at his chest. Deep, painful memories must have been surfacing within him.

"If someone had reached out to me, I might have been able to ask for help. Even if I couldn't have that, just one normal, meaningless conversation with a classmate would have done wonders to brighten those dark days. But no, I was denied even that. Everyone ignored me, and it's obvious why. If anyone associated with me, there was a chance they'd be caught up in the hell I was living. That's what they were all scared of." Naoki continued his monologue as if spitting bile from the very depths of his soul. "I existed, yet no one saw me... Do you have any idea what that's like? Thinking back on it, it was like I was already a ghost."

The moment Naoki paused to catch his breath, Kazuya interjected.

"Yes, you're right. I knew you were being bullied by Takuro. But I didn't pretend not to see it. I knew it was wrong and horrible. That I had to do something.

"Liar. You're no better than Panzee. I've had enough excuses for one day—"

"I'm not lying. I knew I had to do something, so that day I snuck out back with my camera. I took pictures of what Takuro was doing to you."

There, Naoki, who had been spitting hate like a machine gun, suddenly fell silent.

“I knew Panzee wouldn’t do anything if I showed them to him, so I knew I had to stay calm and play my cards wisely. I got together with a few classmates I trusted, and we discussed what we should do. Takuro always acted like the perfect student in front of the adults. We figured his worst fear would be being exposed for the creep he really is, so we thought sneaking one of the pictures into his locker would give him a scare.”

“Did you actually do that?”

“Yes.”

“Then the reason everyone avoided me...”

“Was because if we were found out, Takuro would just end up taking it out on you. It would only make things worse, and everything we’d done would have been for naught. So after talking it over, we decided it would be best to give you some space until it was all over.”

“...”

“But in the end, we couldn’t save you,” Kazuya said, pained. “Takuro’s a smart guy. He probably realized it was us right away.”

Kazuya paused there for the briefest moment. His next words would shock them all.

“A few days after putting the picture in his locker, terrible things started happening to everyone who’d been involved. I was hospitalized with inexplicable stomach pain. Someone else had their wallet stolen, and another one of my friends had a flowerpot dropped on their head. They had to call an ambulance. And this was all on the same day. Do you think that was a coincidence?” Kazuya averted his gaze, hesitantly continuing, “But the worst thing of all was the car accident...”

Hiroshi had been quietly listening all this time, but he could no longer stay silent.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Yeah, I mean Anna. She was helping us.” Biting his lower lip, Kazuya soldiered on. “And that... That was the accident that killed you, Naoki.”

“...”

“We underestimated Takuro. None of us expected him to be a full-blown psychopath. Of course, we didn’t have any proof that that was all his doing. We could have quietly investigated on our own or gone to the police and tried to figure something out, but the last of our courage died with you. When we heard what happened to you, we realized Takuro was far too dangerous to mess with and decided to put it all behind us.”

Kazuya’s earth-shattering confession had Hiroshi speechless. He could hardly believe that Takuro had been the one to orchestrate Anna’s accident. Had he seen her parents’ car coming? Is that why he’d told Naoki to run out into traffic? Even if it was, surely he hadn’t expected things to blow up so spectacularly. At least, that’s what Hiroshi hoped.

Like Kazuya had said, there was no proof any of it was Takuro’s handiwork. It could all just be a coincidence. Not that that would absolve him of his sins.

“No... I don’t believe you...” Naoki whispered, his voice barely audible. “Are you trying to say it’s my fault you all met with misfortune? Just for trying to save me? Impossible. If that’s true, you should be furious with me. You should be screaming in my face for what I wrought on you. And Anna... I’ve talked to her plenty of times since the accident, and she’s never said a word about this. Why...? Why is that?”

“Maybe she didn’t want you to suffer any further,” Hiroshi quickly replied.

That’s what his gut told him. That would be just like Anna.

“She just lost her parents and was badly injured herself. How could she have the presence of mind to worry about someone else? There’s no way anyone that kind exists—”

“That’s not true. I’m looking at you right now, Naoki,” interrupted Hiroshi.

“...Huh?” Naoki started, his brow furrowing into an odd shape.

“This is just a guess, but was it actually you who made it so we were the characters in Shun’s escape game?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I inspired Shun through his dreams to create a game

where Takuro and his lackeys were chased around by the Jailhouse monster. He hated Takuro too, and I wanted to use that to get revenge for the both of us.”

“No. That’s not true, is it?” Hiroshi asked, looking Naoki straight in the eye.

“What are you trying to say?” Naoki asked in return, his eyes shifting about nervously. He was clearly feeling the pressure.

“If you really wanted to get revenge, you wouldn’t have needed to do it in such a roundabout way. Things could have been far simpler and more direct. For example, you could have just told Shun to kill Takuro. In fact, wasn’t it just a coincidence that Shun’s game and the Jailhouse synced up? And if that hadn’t happened, you never would’ve been able to exact revenge on Takuro.”

“...”

“In that case, why did you make Shun create that game? The answer is obvious: you wanted to save Shun.”

“I have no idea what you’re—”

“There’s no need to hide it. You saw yourself in Shun since he was experiencing the same cruel bullying you were forced to suffer through. I bet you were worried he might break at some point. You wanted to save him, and so you inspired him to make the game as a way to vent his pent-up anger.”

Naoki was absolutely silent. He denied nothing, leaving Hiroshi finally sure of everything. Naoki hadn’t lost his mind. He’d just been confused for a while after becoming a ghost and being alone for so long with no one to acknowledge his existence. Most likely, his personality was really the same as it had always been.

“I hear you transported Takeshi’s body to the home ec kitchen. Takuro said you were trying to eat him, but that’s not the case, is it? You two had fond memories together there, didn’t you? I recall you liked to talk about cooking with each other.”

“No... I...”

“Why are you forcing yourself to play the villain? I’ve known for a while now that it wasn’t actually you who killed Mr. Inoue or Takeshi.”

“Huh? Really?” Kazuya asked, baffled.

“Melting faces and shooting holes in people’s temples isn’t the blue giant’s M.O.,” Hiroshi explained to Kazuya, then turned back to Naoki. “So, Naoki, let’s just stop this. It doesn’t look to me like you’re enjoying this vengeance of yours.”

“Shut up! SHUT UP!” Naoki shouted loud enough that the very air in the room shook. “Don’t order me around. You think you know it all? You have no idea how much I’ve suffered!”

Unable to contain his anger any longer, he slammed his right fist into the bare concrete. It rattled the entire building, sending a great crack up the wall.

Naoki’s heavy breathing echoed in their ears.

“Help me.”

That was what it sounded like to Hiroshi.

“Naoki—”

“I told you to shut the hell up!” Naoki screamed at him before practically fleeing the room.

For the longest time, Hiroshi had been oblivious to the human heart. As a result, he himself had never picked up on Naoki’s bullying.

But...

Stepping into the hall, he swore to himself as he watched that lonely figure run off...

This time, I want to save him.

3

It was 7:45 according to the school’s great clock by the time the patrol car arrived at the front gate. A familiar stern-looking police officer stepped out of the car. His face was as stony as ever as he listened to the teachers explain the situation. Anna watched them talk from around the side of the gym. A second police officer was trying to force the front door open, but Anna knew all too well it was pointless. Not even his gun would put a dent in it.

“Ungh...”

Hearing Mari’s groaning, Anna turned around. She was lying on the gym bench. A thick coat lay over her, placed there by her good friend Satsuki. Satsuki sat there, faithfully kneeling by her side, completely defenseless against the chill of the bitter winter morning.

“Mari, can you hear me?” the nurse, who all of the boys at school drooled over, asked her.

“Oh... What happened to me?” Mari groaned in a feeble voice.

“Are you nauseous? Do you hurt anywhere?”

“No, I’m fine,” she said in a weak, but clear voice.

For the moment, there seemed to be no cause for concern. Anna sighed in relief.

“You seem to have a slight fever. I recommend you go home for the day.”

“But I have to...”

“Oh, honestly, Mari! Enough!” Satsuki shouted, shaking Mari’s hand as she held it.

“Oh, Satsuki. Good morning.”

“Don’t give me that! Do you know what I found when I came to school this morning? The school all boarded up and you collapsed on the ground! You scared me half to death. Are you really okay?”

“Yeah. I felt a little sluggish earlier, but now I’m totally fine,” Mari sat up and answered.

“What in the world happened?”

“I don’t really know. I took some cold medicine over by the water fountain, and—”

As she spoke, Mari’s gaze shifted Anna’s way. Anna gulped.

But how?

The bright morning sun seemed to be disguising it from the others, but Anna

saw it immediately... those unmistakably wide eyes. Mari's dilated pupils were looking right at her.



Chapter 10

KIMOCHI

—Emotion—

1

Hate... Hate humans...

A thick, black, tar-like slime was swallowing Naoki's heart.

Kill... Kill them all...

Prejudice, jealousy, resentment... A multitude of negative emotions, braided together like rope, bound his hands and feet.

Help me!

He screamed.

No... These aren't my emotions. What I really wanted was— kill.

Pain shot through his temple.

Why are you hesitating? What did they ever do for you? Don't be fooled by their excuses now. Hate. Hate them more and more. Make them regret all the suffering they put you through. Return it tenfold.

The girl Naoki was sharing his current body with realized his incertitude and relentlessly assaulted his mind, attempting to take it over completely. It took all his fortitude to resist, but he couldn't let go just yet. No, not yet.

Naoki awoke to find himself back in the science lab. It was a complete mess, just like he'd left it. The shelves were tipped over, and shattered glass littered the floor. In the center of the room lay Mr. Inoue's body.

Naoki kneeled down at his old homeroom teacher's side and carefully lowered his eyelids. With his eyes closed, he almost looked at peace. Naoki then put his hands together in prayer over the body.

"What are you doing?!" a hysteric scream slipped from his lips. At the same time, pain shot through the temporal region of his brain. "That man was a coward who knew you were being bullied and pretended not to! He doesn't deserve your mourning!"

"Shut up!" Naoki shouted so loudly his dry throat cracked, filling his mouth with the taste of blood. "I was so sure it would work this time. That I could

finally be at peace, but... What's going on? I hated Panzee so much, but when he died... Takeshi too. When they died, I didn't feel better. I only felt worse."

"That's probably because you haven't fully embraced your role as an avenger. An executioner. You'll understand once you take a life yourself. It can be so much fun."

Naoki rose to his feet. He tried to get his legs to stop moving, but couldn't.

"Why don't you try killing that uppity boy with the glasses first? Killing one is the same as killing a thousand. The first time is always the hardest. Once you've gotten that out of the way, I think you'll see what I mean. It'll be so much easier. Then I'm sure you'll find what you're looking for."

Naoki's heart wavered when he heard those words. She had a point. He'd tortured Takuro and the others over and over, but he'd never actually killed anyone himself. For all his rambling about vengeance, it seemed he was still too afraid to take a life. If he could summon the courage and take that final step—kill with his own hands—would he be released from his suffering? Naoki's body moved slowly as he turned for the door. He'd ceased resisting and was following the girl's lead.

"Wait..."

He heard a faint voice call out to him. Simultaneously, he felt a strong pressure on his chest. He turned around to see that the skeleton in the corner of the lab had reached out its boney arms and wrapped them around him.

"Don't go."

Its empty eye sockets stared right at him. Naoki quickly realized what was going on. He recalled Anna once telling him about the ghost of a girl who'd killed herself in the science lab.

"Vengeance didn't bring me peace. It only made my suffering worse." The chattering of the skull's teeth was a strange, lonely sound. "Don't make the same mistake I did."

"Silence! Out of the way!"

Naoki felt his right leg move. Before he knew what was happening, he'd

kicked the skeleton. It hit the floor, clattering to pieces around Mr. Inoue's corpse.

"Vengeance didn't bring me peace."

The ghost's words echoed in his brain. Would killing someone really bring him happiness? Or would it only bring more sorrow? Who was he supposed to believe?

Naoki fled the science lab and sprinted up the stairs without slowing.

"Where are you going?" the girl laughed. "Hurry up and grow a pair already. You know you can never escape me."

Ignoring her, he ran through the third floor hallway. She seemed to be content just observing, and didn't interfere for now. Perhaps she knew she could easily retake control anytime she wanted.

Before he realized it, Naoki was standing in front of the smoking room he'd locked Shun in. Why had he come here? Not knowing the answer, he threw open the door. Shocked, Shun looked up at him.

"Naoki..."

He could see that Shun had been trying everything possible to escape his bonds. The only thing of note in the room, the standing ashtray, had been overturned and was now stained with something red. Naoki walked over and grabbed Shun's arm, pulling it toward him. His wrists were smeared with blood.

"It's pointless to try and escape," he spat, pushing Shun away.

He fell to the floor. His face twisted in pain, but he continued to look straight at Naoki.

"Is everyone okay?"

The pleading look in his eyes made Naoki hesitate. Shun was supposed to hate Takuro and Takeshi. Why did he care what happened to them? How could he make that face?

"Takeshi's dead," Naoki answered, pained.

"What?" Shun's face stiffened. Tears welled in his eyes. "It can't be..."

“Why?!” Naoki bellowed.

Something red-hot burned in his chest.

“Didn’t you want them all dead? Do I need to remind you just what they put you through?”

Naoki finally understood why he’d come here. He wanted to interrogate Shun.

“Why... Why don’t you hate them? *Why?*”

Shun paused for a moment. Then he opened his mouth, speaking with great care and deliberation.

“No one’s perfect. Everyone clashes and has their differences. But fighting over every little slight won’t change anything.”

“You’re just a patsy, then. An utter fool. People are going to use you for everything you’re worth and then leave you high and dry.”

“Given the choice, I’d rather be used than hateful. Even if I’m a fool, surely some other fool will eventually come along and extend the same kindness to me,” Shun answered with a smile, shockingly enough.

“How...?” Naoki asked, his voice shaking. “How can you smile?”

“Naoki, I know all too well why you’re angry. I’ve felt the same hate before.”

“I know! So why—”

“But working together with everyone to survive the Jailhouse changed me. And technically, that’s all thanks to you, Naoki. Because of you, I was saved. So... thank you.”

Shun bowed his head in a gesture of genuine gratitude. Seeing it, Naoki felt something pierce his heart.

“Now it’s my turn. Can’t I be the kind fool who helps you?”

Naoki staggered, stepping in the puddle at his feet. He was shocked to realize it was a puddle of his own tears.

Hiroshi held up the key he'd found in the principal's office and scrutinized it. In the end, it was the only thing he'd managed to find after scouring this area of the school.

He and Kazuya had come to the storeroom in hopes the key would unlock the only door they hadn't been able to open yet. But unfortunately, the key wouldn't even fit in the keyhole. The key was badly rusted, and trying to force it would only snap it.

Giving up on the storeroom for now, the two boys headed back to the art room to meet up with Takuro and Mika. When they opened the door, they found Takuro sitting by the windows. He looked like he'd been through hell.

"What's the matter?" Hiroshi asked.

"It's Mika..."

Takuro's gaze fell to his feet where Mika lay. She was clutching her chest, her body contorted in pain.

"I'm... fine..." she answered through labored breaths. She was conscious, but there wasn't anything else positive to be said about her condition.

"What happened?"

"Right after you guys left, we were attacked by these amoeba monsters in the sewing workshop. I managed to pull them off of her after I transformed. Mika said she was okay at the time, so we kept up the search, but... She was really just putting up a brave front."

Takuro's face twisted in agony as he recounted what happened.

"Once we were done and came back here, she suddenly collapsed."

He shook his head, his voice growing angry.

"It's my fault. If I'd noticed sooner..."

Hiroshi knelt by Mika's side and lightly held her wrist. Unlike Takuro when he was in the nurse's office, her pulse was incredibly erratic. The monsters' biology was a complete mystery to Hiroshi. He had no idea whether he should simply leave her alone or try some kind of first aid.

“I suggest we put an end to this game as quickly as possible,” he said, turning to look at Takuro. “Were you able to find anything?”

“Yeah. We solved a puzzle in the conference room, which opened up a wall panel where we found a small key. After looking all over, we finally figured out that it went to a locked cabinet in the kitchen, but we didn’t find the red stone there...”

Takuro half-heartedly pulled a bottle out from his breast pocket. The label read “white vinegar.”



“Vinegar?” Kazuya asked, cocking his head to the side quizzically.

“I dunno what purpose it’ll serve, but since we got it from solving a puzzle, we must need it to escape somehow.”

“How are we... going to escape with one bottle of vinegar?” asked a skeptical Kazuya.

“I see. That must be it,” Hiroshi said with a nod.

He then borrowed the bottle from Takuro and dropped the key from the principal’s office inside.

“What are you doing?” Takuro and Kazuya asked in perfect harmony.

“We searched the entire school and only found a rusty key and a bottle of vinegar, so this must be the solution. Iron oxide-hydroxide, the compound responsible for the red color of rust, is easily melted by acetic acid. Therefore, if we place the rusty key in some vinegar...”

Hiroshi shook the bottle and then tipped it over to retrieve the key. To everyone else’s surprise, it was completely free of rust. In reality, however, it was impossible for rust to dissolve that quickly. Hiroshi could only assume the instant nature of the process was because that was the way the game was programmed.

“Mika, please hold on. We’re almost done,” he said.

Hiroshi then took the now-sparkling key and bolted out of the room. He flew down the stairs two at a time, making his way to the storeroom. When he slid the key into the knob this time, he could turn it with a satisfying click. He then threw open the door and jumped inside.

In the center of the storeroom, as if awaiting his arrival, was the red stone. It alone was illuminated, which almost made it look like it was projecting its own light.

The goal was so close now. Hiroshi was sure of it. Grabbing the stone, he hurried toward the sewing workshop. In the game, more and more enemies would appear as the player approached the climax. Fearing the amoeba monsters that attacked Mika might come back, he kept one eye on the ceiling

as he ran. Fortunately, his path was protozoan-free.

Bursting into the workshop, he placed the stone into the mannequin's left eye socket. It somehow triggered the mannequin's head to pop off, revealing a new key. Snatching it up, Hiroshi sped back to the third floor where the others were waiting for him.

"I've found it! But I don't know what to do now... What is this key for? We've already scoured the entire school," he announced.

"Actually, no. There's one place we haven't checked yet," Takuro replied. "The room right next door. No matter how hard I kicked the door, it wouldn't break."

"Even with your strength? I see... Then it must be the place."

Hiroshi looked up at the clock on the wall. It was now just past 8:00 AM. They only had 20 minutes left.

"Let's hurry," Hiroshi said, pocketing the key again.

However, Takuro shook his head and said, "Sorry, but you go on ahead. I'm staying here. I can't just leave Mika behind."

"Thanks... Takuro..." Mika whispered, her voice weak.

She could barely even open her mouth anymore. It was all too obvious the end was upon her.

"Just hearing you say that makes me happy. So please... Go with Hiroshi."

She stretched out her right hand, though it seemed she could no longer see anything. Her hand drifted aimlessly through the air.

"No. I promised, didn't I?" Takuro grabbed her hand and held it tight. "Till death do us part."

"Thank you... Thank you, Takuro... I'm so happy... And so, so sorry. I hoped we could be together forever, but... it looks like it's time for me to go."

"Don't say that! Stay with me!"

"I'm sorry..."

"If you die, so will I!"

“No, Takuro. You can’t. You have to live on. If you don’t, then not even my memory will survive me. Just think of me from time to time... and that will be enough for me...”

“Mika...”

“Takuro, I’m sorry, but there’s no time to waste.”

Hiroshi pressed the suffering boy for a decision. He knew it was heartless, but something much greater was at stake. Someone had to be heartless or else they would never move forward.

“Fine.”

Takuro bit his lip and nodded.

“Once we’ve cleared the game, I’ll come right back. Just 15 more minutes. You can wait that long, can’t you?” he asked, rubbing Mika’s hand.

“You’ve made me wait my whole life. What’s 15 more minutes? Or so I’d like to say, but... I’m sorry. I don’t think I can.”

Unable to bear the sight of her forced smile, Hiroshi silently made his exit. By the time he made it to the next room over, he could hear Takuro’s wails of agony.

3

Displayed on the computer monitor was Shun’s escape game. Naoki leaned forward and studied the screen. Takuro, who had been crying over Mika’s corpse, slowly stood and went after Hiroshi and Kazuya.

“I started this. I have to end it with my own hands.”

Takuro’s dialog flashed across the bottom of the screen. Even in text form, the nuance was crystal clear. Rather than hate for Naoki, Takuro was now overcome with deep sadness and regret over losing Mika.

“Why...?”

He slammed the desk and stood up. He then walked into the adjoining room and approached Shun, who was watching him from his spot by the window.

“Why? This isn’t Takuro! Even the smallest thing would set him off like a bomb! He’s a despicable bastard by nature... so what is this supposed to be? Why is this happening?!”

“The rust and vinegar,” Shun said calmly, sounding almost like a teacher instructing a student.

“Huh?”

“How do we know that vinegar removes rust? Because it’s a chemical reaction. Just as we learned in science class that hydrogen chloride and sodium hydroxide neutralize each other, creating sodium chloride and water... humans exchange what they’re missing by interacting with each other. That’s how we change. At least, that’s what I think. That’s how we become adults.”

“...Do you think I can change, too?” Naoki whispered, looking away in embarrassment.

“I think you’re already changing,” Shun answered with a gentle smile.

Those words shattered the wall Naoki had built around his heart, the wall he’d been hiding behind for so long.

Vengeance is so stupid. Let’s just end this farce.

“Thanks,” Naoki said, turning his back to Shun. “I’m glad I met you. If I hadn’t, I would’ve given in to the hate. I would’ve drowned in the suffering I made for myself—”

Suddenly, his head was racked with splitting pain. The whole world went dark. He tried to call out for help, but he was struck mute. His heart was throbbing. Something sinister was taking ahold of him from the inside.

“I let you do as you pleased as thanks for setting me free, but it looks like that was a waste of time.” The girl’s voice echoed in his ears. “You’re a hindrance now, so I’m going to have you disappear.”

He could feel his body expanding. His mind was fading. Most likely, he wouldn’t be coming back from this. He wasn’t scared of slipping into the void. No, in fact, if it meant an end to the pain and suffering, nothing would make him happier. But there was something he had to say before he vanished

entirely. One last warning. An apology for what he'd done.

“Turn—” Fighting back the encroaching black mists, Naoki shouted, “Turn back time! If you do, you can save everyone!”

He couldn't see anything. He couldn't hear anything, either. He had no idea whether Shun heard him or not, but he still had to try. Naoki continued to scream with all his might.

“One more thing! Don't go to the roof! She's set up a trap there! Be careful —”

And then, just like that, Naoki's consciousness flickered out.



Chapter 11

KISAKU

—Plan—

1

The boys all stood before the room next to the art room. On the door hung a “do not enter” sign. Students weren’t allowed in here. Even Hiroshi had never been inside. He knew only that the faculty used it as a smoking room and that it had roof access.

He inserted the key he’d cleaned off in the keyhole under the doorknob and turned it to the left. There was an audible click. He looked at Kazuya and Takuro before placing his hand on the knob. The next moment, they heard shouting from inside.

“Shun!”

Hiroshi threw open the door, but what he beheld inside left him dumbstruck. Shun was lying on the floor, his hands and feet bound. And Naoki, who was in the midst of transforming into a monster, was standing over him.

“Shun... listen... turn back... Shut up! Shut up! Turn back time... If you do... save... You’re so annoying! I don’t need you anymore! Hurry up and disappear!”

The monster’s body pulsed, nearly reverting back to Naoki’s form before suddenly growing huge again. It was completely unstable. It was as if two minds were fighting within one body. Perhaps that was exactly what was going on, Hiroshi realized.

“Go... roof... up... there...”

Those were Naoki’s last words.

“AHHHHH!”

An ear-splitting roar then flooded from his mouth as his body exploded inside. His head punched right through the ceiling, making the whole room shake. One of the light fixtures broke free with a snap, plunging down toward Shun below.

“Look out!”

Hiroshi moved reflexively, throwing himself over his classmate. He tensed, bracing himself for the pain... but it never came. He slowly looked up to see

Takuro smiling. The light fixture was lying in pieces by the window. He must have used his inhuman speed and strength to kick it out of the way.

“Whoa! Wh-What is that thing?”

Kazuya, meanwhile, stumbled backwards as he looked up at the huge monster in horror. He tried his best to stand, but the strength had completely left his legs. It was all a perfectly normal reaction considering this was his first time meeting a monster.

“What in the world is going on? You guys know, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I’ll explain later. Let’s just focus on surviving for right now.”

“Okay, but how? Can we even beat that thing?”

Despite the circumstances, however, he was still lucid and rational. Perhaps Kazuya had more guts than anyone realized.

Takuro took a step forward, glaring at the monster. Hiroshi could tell he was readying himself for a fight. He was probably about to transform as well, but the monster suddenly turned on its heels and fled the room like it hadn’t even seen them. It was a mystery why it didn’t instantly attack, but the boys knew they didn’t have any time to stop and think about it. Hiroshi immediately got to work untying Shun.

The monster’s footsteps were quickly fading into the distance. It sounded like it had taken the stairs in the adjoining room that led up to the roof. By the time Hiroshi finally had Shun free, everything was quiet.

“Thanks, guys,” Shun said with a smile.

His wrists and ankles were painfully raw, but he appeared to be in perfect health otherwise. Hiroshi couldn’t help letting out a sigh of relief.

2

Unfortunately, they couldn’t enjoy their reunion for long.

“We’ve gotta hurry! Let’s move!”

Nearly as soon as he was on his feet, Shun dashed into the adjoining room.

Staring hard at the computer monitor on the desk, he began clacking away at the keyboard with agile fingers.

“What are you doing?” Hiroshi asked as he peered over Shun’s shoulder.

On the screen was a familiar game, which was currently displaying a pixelated boy with blue hair at a computer.

“Naoki said something before he turned into the monster, remember? I couldn’t put it all together, but it sounded like he was saying something like, ‘Turn back time.’”

“Turn back time...?”

Hiroshi was suddenly struck with a strange sense of déjà vu. He could swear something like this had happened before...

“Reality and the game are synched again. That being the case...”

Shun opened up the computer’s settings menu. A simple analog-style clock appeared in the center of the screen, currently reading 8:09 AM. They only had 11 minutes before time was up.

“The clock on the screen is real-time, right? The two worlds are running in parallel, so if we change time in the game via the computer’s internal clock, that change should be mirrored in the real world,” Shun explained as he tapped away at the keyboard. “In other words, we should be able to use this to literally turn back time.”

“Is that so?” Kazuya asked, one eyebrow raised.

This probably all sounded beyond farfetched to him. Talk of turning back time in such a fashion was decidedly unrealistic, but the wary Hiroshi wasn’t even batting an eye. He was still combating the strange feeling that he’d already been through this—all of this craziness—once before. Takuro, calm and steeled, simply nodded. It only further confirmed Hiroshi’s strange feeling.

“If I turn it back two hours, to 6:10 AM... That’s when you guys were passed out in the courtyard, right? So once we clear the game and escape the building, we’ll all be able to restart from then. It’ll kick us back in order to reconcile the time difference.”

“Does that mean Mika and Takeshi... everyone who died will come back?”

Shun nodded emphatically in response to Takuro’s question.

“Really? They’ll all come back...? Thank... Thank God...”

Slumping against the wall, Takuro let out a sigh of relief. Hiroshi followed suit. But for some reason, Shun’s expression remained uneasy.

“Huh? That’s weird,” he mumbled, tapping away at the keyboard.

“What’s wrong?” Hiroshi asked, returning his gaze to the monitor.

The clock still read 8:11 AM. Nothing had changed.

“No matter how many times I try and change it, the clock won’t update.”

“What’s going on?”

As quickly as their hope had arrived, it vanished. A silent tension gripped all four boys.

“Oh. Maybe...” Shun opened a few windows and began searching for something with inhuman speed. “I knew it. This computer’s managed by a different one, so we don’t have the right permissions to change the time.”

Hearing that, the light bulb came on for Hiroshi.

“Ah, yes. A slave clock.”

“Slave clock? What the heck is that?” Takuro asked.

“There are dozens of clocks within the school, so how is it that they all manage to keep the same time? You’ve never seen anyone going around to synchronize them, have you?”

“Huh, guess not. I bet the big clock on the roof would be a huge pain to set.”

“Those are all slave clocks, which depend entirely on a signal from a master clock to tell them what time it is. That makes it possible to manage an entire system just by changing the one clock—the master clock.”

“So if we find this master clock, we can change the computer clock?”

“Theoretically.”

“Then where is it?”

“I couldn’t say. I don’t even know where to start looking, either,” Hiroshi answered honestly.

“Then we’re screwed!” Takuro exclaimed in exasperation, looking like he’d been slapped in the face. “We’ve only got ten minutes left. What do we do now?”

“I might have an idea...” said Kazuya, who had been quietly listening in confused silence thus far.

Everyone’s eyes fell on him.

“You’re looking for the master clock, right? It’s probably up there,” he said, pointing to the staircase the monster had taken.

“On the roof?”

“No. At the top of the stairs is a control room. It should be right behind the giant clock.”

“How do you know that?”

“For the longest time, I always used to wonder how it was that the clocks at school were never wrong. I asked Panzee one day, and he told me all about radio clocks and...”

“Let’s go.”

Hiroshi took Shun by the arm and quickly led him up the stairs. The door at the top leading outside was wide open. The monster was out on the roof just beyond it, but they couldn’t afford to be scared now.

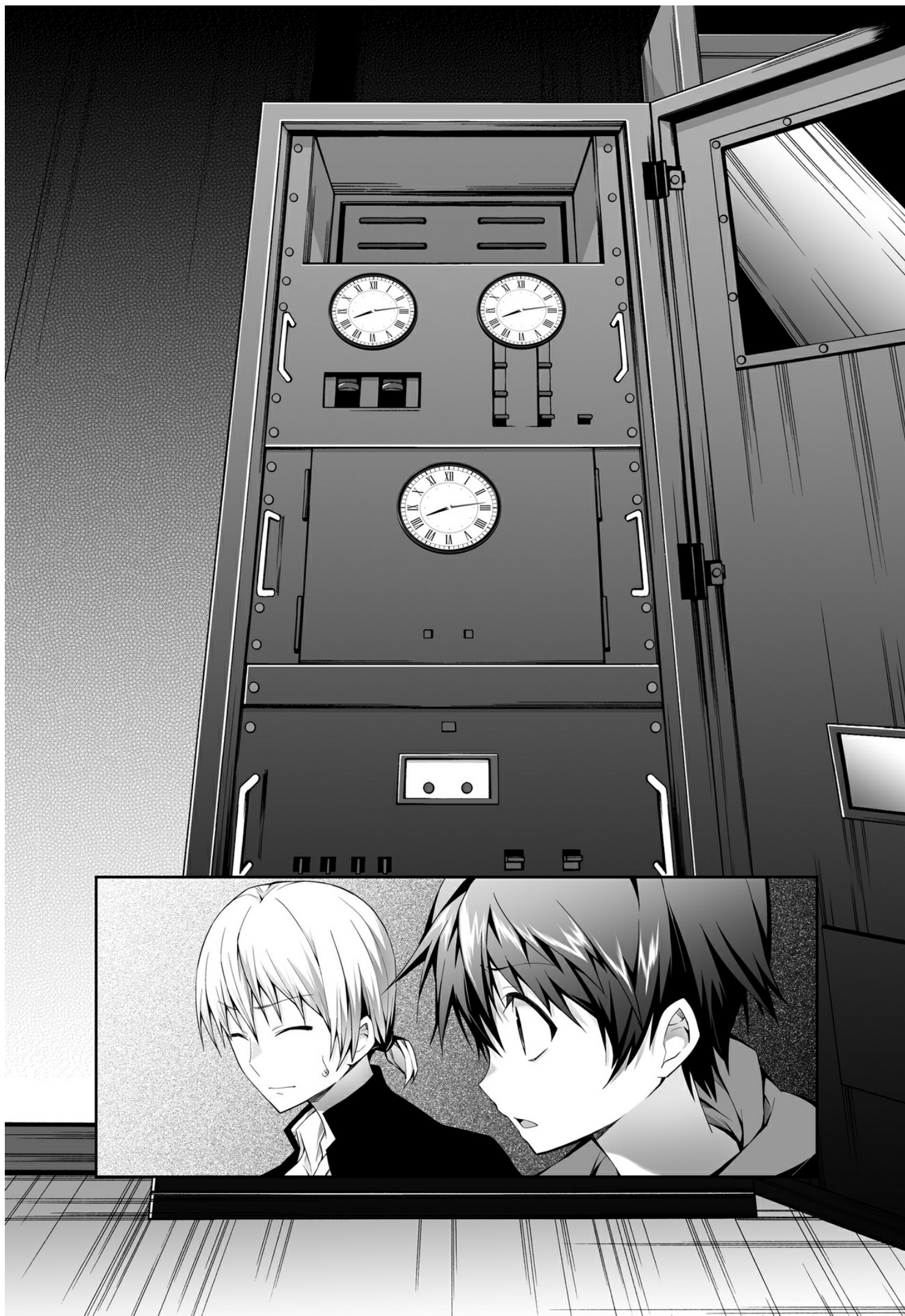
To the right of it was another door. It was so small that the boys would have to bend down to get through it, but it was a completely unremarkable metal door otherwise, labeled unceremoniously with a sign: “Control Room.”

Please don’t be locked...

Hiroshi said a silent prayer as he placed his hand on the knob. If it was another locked door that was too sturdy for Takuro to kick in, then... They certainly didn’t have time to go looking for the key, but the boys were met with a small stroke of luck. The door opened without a fuss. Their prayers had been answered.

Exhaling their pent-up tension, the boys stepped inside. Shun went in first with Hiroshi and Kazuya taking up the rear. The room was tiny, just barely large enough for them all to fit in like packed sardines. The low ceiling didn't help that impression, either.

But perhaps more remarkably, the room was dusty enough that it seemed no one had been here in quite some time. Specks of dust danced in the single ray of sunshine beaming in from the tiny window. Across the room from it was a white box attached to the wall. Surely that had to be it—the master clock. Hiroshi had imagined something digital, but the multiple clocks nestled inside the box were all analog.



“Can you figure it out?” Takuro asked from outside, poking only his head in through the door.

“Yeah,” replied Shun. “As long as we can figure out what these buttons do, changing the time should be a cinch. What do you think, Kazuya?”

“Let me give you a hand. I’m good at tinkering with stuff,” Kazuya offered.

He seemed confident he could handle the task, so Hiroshi decided it would be all right to let him and Shun handle this.

“Shun, Kazuya, I’m leaving things here to you. Takuro, let’s go to the roof,” Hiroshi instructed as he exited the control room.

He hadn’t been able to shake his worries about what the monster might be up to. For all he knew, it was getting ready to jump off the building and attack the unsuspecting students in the courtyard below. And that thought alone was enough to make him hasten his pace.

“Yeah, let’s get a move on,” Takuro agreed as he stepped out onto the roof. “I’m pretty sure Naoki said something about going to the roof, anyway.”

“Indeed.” Hiroshi followed after him. “The last key—our ticket to escaping—should be just up ahead.”

Hiroshi swiftly looked around. There was no immediate sign of the monster, but it had to be around here somewhere. There was no access to the roof other than the door they’d just come through. A cold northern wind mercilessly raked at their skin. Hiroshi kept up his guard and followed close behind Takuro.

“I suspect that we should split up and look for clues at this point. We’re direly pressed for time.”

By Hiroshi’s estimation, they only had maybe six minutes left.

“Don’t worry. If we run out of time, I’ll hop the fence and get us down that way,” Takuro declared, proudly pounding his chest.

With his superhuman body, not even a several-story fall would put a scratch on Takuro. The real problem would be the aftermath. A considerable crowd had gathered in the courtyard below, which included several armed police officers now. How would they all react to a monster suddenly appearing out of

nowhere?

“Welcome to the last level,” a low voice said from above.

Hiroshi and Takuro both looked up to see the monster sitting atop the water tower.

“You only have five minutes left. Everything okay?”

It cocked its giant head to the side as it swung its legs. It didn’t sound at all like Naoki. The monster’s other consciousness must have taken completely over, or so Hiroshi figured. He bit his lower lip.

“This is the final battle, but there’s no saving and reloading like in a game. You’d better fight like your lives are on the line.”

There, the monster slowly stood up.

3

It was now 8:15 AM. The police had arrived half an hour ago, but it hadn’t changed much. The crowd had merely gotten a little larger.

In five minutes, the school bell would ring. The courtyard was overflowing with students. A gathering of teachers were visibly discussing something serious over by the corner of the building. Most likely they were debating whether to keep the students waiting or send them home.

Anna, avoiding her classmates, was observing the crowd from the shadow of the gym. If she ran into anyone else she knew, she’d inevitably be bombarded with questions about why she’d been absent—doubly so if word made its way around that she’d been one of the first to arrive that morning. The commotion would make it all too easy for her to miss the SOS signal from Shun and the others. She had no choice but to keep her distance, simply watching as things played out.

Her gaze nervously shifted to the bench in front of the gym. While she was worried for her friends, something else was currently commanding most of her attention. It was Mari. After she collapsed, Anna couldn’t help noticing how wide and black Mari’s pupils looked. They looked just like hers did. The question

was why.

During her hospitalization after the accident last year, the doctors had given Anna a drug called Atropine, which temporarily enlarged her pupils so her eyes could be examined. Perhaps something similar had happened with Mari, but Anna hadn't seen her use any sort of eye drops. All she'd had with her was cold medicine. Maybe it was a side effect of that... The unease ate at Anna's gut. She couldn't help thinking the worst.

Mari's friend Satsuki was sitting next to her on the bench, watching over her. Other than coughing every now and again, Mari seemed perfectly fine. But something was wrong. Anna couldn't say exactly why she felt that way, which was frustrating to say the least, but there was definitely something going on with Mari. There was something different about her.

Was it her scent? Anna's heightened sense of smell was so strong now that she could detect things too subtle or faint for humans. And concentrating on it, Anna realized that was exactly it. Mari smelled different from everyone else. It was a strange smell, something inhuman... Yes, quite like the way the blue giants smelled.

"Mari! What's the matter?!" she suddenly heard Satsuki shout.

Mari, who had been happily chatting away with her best friend just seconds ago, was now tense and spasming violently. She was in danger of hurling herself off the bench and hitting her head.

I can't let this happen.

Anna jumped out from the shadow cast by the gym and made a beeline for the bench. A few other people who'd noticed were on their way over too.

"Mari! Mari, wake up!"

A terrified Satsuki was leaning over her friend, doing her best to keep her up on the bench.

"Get off!" a deep voice roared.

Suddenly Satsuki went flying through the air, landing flat on her back on the ground. Everyone who had been running over to help froze in place. They

watched in confusion and shock as Mari slowly rose from the bench.

“Grrrrr...”

A creepy growl escaped her lips. It sounded like something that had crawled up from the very depths of hell. Her whole body was shaking. Thick veins bulged underneath the skin on the backs of her hands. They swelled and swelled, becoming huge lumps.

It started on her hands, but it didn't stop there. Lumps were forming all over her body and expanding rapidly. Her glasses slipped off her nose and fell to the ground. Her face was so terribly swollen that she no longer looked like herself. Her uniform ripped here and there, exposing skin with more lumps. The lumps then began to merge, forming even bigger lumps.

“Rahhhhh!”

Mari was screaming in pain. No... Whatever this was, it was no longer Mari. You couldn't even call it human. It was just a mass of the weird, pulsating blue lumps that were still continuing to grow.

“Oh, I see what's going on here. This is some prank, isn't it?” The gym teacher approached what used to be Mari. “You really got us covering up all the doors and windows, but this is taking it too far. Whose stupid idea was this? Well? Take off that silly costume right this instant and—”

The moment he reached out and tried to touch the blue mass that used to be Mari, sharp teeth emerged from within it. They sank into his arm with a disgusting squelching sound as they gnashed. It was all so sudden that the gym teacher didn't even realize what was happening. He just stood there in a daze as a fountain of bright red liquid gushed from his elbow. Showered in a rain of his own blood, he sank to the ground. In a few short moments, the monster was finished chewing and bared its teeth once again. A bizarre, unearthly cry echoed across the courtyard.

“AAAHHHHH!”

Upon the realization that something terrible was afoot, the crowd fell into an instinctual panic. Over 300 students raced for the school gate, pushing and shoving each other out of the way. Anyone who fell was immediately trampled.

But try as they might to run, the blue, fleshy mass descended on the crowd. The air was electrified with all the agonized screams. It was pure carnage. The police officers stood and stared, unable to comprehend the situation. The stern-faced officer eventually collected himself enough to draw his gun, but there was no way he could get a clear shot amid all the chaos.

Anna too was forced to bear witness. Everyone was going to die, and she was just watching. Her fingers curled into tight fists.

No, I don't want them to see my true form... But I'm the only one who can stand up to that monster. I can't just stand here. I can't just let them all die.

Every second she spent thinking about it was another student dead. She had no choice but to act.



Chapter 12

KISEKI

—Miracle—

1

Shun took a few deep breaths to settle himself.

Stay calm.

He repeated that mantra in his head as he tapped on the number pad to the master clock. He'd been in worse danger many times before. And more than once, he'd completely given up hope. But each and every time, he'd survived by working together with his friends. This time would be no different. It would all work out, he was sure.

Operating the master clock wasn't all that difficult. It was basically the same as setting up a wrist watch. With the push of a few buttons, the words "time settings" flashed on the LCD screen.

There.

A sigh of relief slipped his lips. This menu should allow him to turn back time.

"I don't really understand what's going on, but is this really going to save everyone?" Kazuya asked from beside Shun as he worked.

Shun nodded silently and pressed the enter key in the center of the keypad. The screen then changed. He'd assumed a digital clock would show up, but instead four underscores appeared. With some trepidation, he punched in "0615." In other words, a quarter past six—two hours ago. Once all four digits read on the display as he'd input them, his shaking finger pressed the enter key again. The whole screen flashed red and began blinking the word "error" at him. Seeing that, Shun realized what was going on.

"What happened?"

"It's asking for a password," he explained to the confused Kazuya. "It seems you have to enter the correct four-digit code in order to change the settings."

As he spoke, Shun tried punching in "0000." That was the standard factory-default code for most devices like this. He was hoping he'd get lucky and no one had ever changed it, but the display flashed red again.

What now?

He pressed his hand to his chest and took a deep breath.

Don't lose your cool. Think.

Shun closed his eyes and turned his brain to full throttle. The passcode was four digits, meaning there were about ten thousand possibilities. If he started from 0001 and worked his way up from there, he would eventually stumble across the right combination. But that would take too much time. No matter how quickly he might be able to enter each sequence, he only had five minutes; there were only so many he could try. It was also possible that repeatedly entering incorrect passcodes might lock him out. It was too dangerous to start entering numbers at random. Shun closed his eyes tighter.

What would Hiroshi do?

The monster jumped down from its perch on the water tower. Hiroshi instinctively grabbed on to the rooftop handrail. The floor creaked as the shock wave rippled by, shaking the whole building. Dust billowed into the air, clouding his vision.

“Now, let’s enjoy one final game,” said a giant, blue silhouette through the haze. “But don’t worry. I won’t ask you to do something as ridiculous as defeat me. The rules are simple: if you two can escape from here safely, you clear the game. I’ll spare everyone.”

A cold wind began to blow. It whipped away the clouds of dust, revealing the monster standing not even a meter away from the boys. It was such a sudden surprise that Hiroshi froze in place, unable to move. He and Takuro were easy prey just standing there, but for some reason, the monster didn’t move either. It simply continued to leer at them, as though it was in no hurry to break its new toys.

“You have four minutes left. Good luck.”

The monster’s eyes shifted slightly. Following its gaze, Hiroshi spotted a red box labeled “escape chute” identical to the ones he’d seen in the art room. Opening it would instantly trigger the chute to inflate, giving them a way to get down to the ground below. It would be an easy escape. Takuro must have

realized the same thing, because he was already on the move. He quickly slipped past the monster, heading straight for the box.

Something didn't feel right. Hiroshi cocked his head to the side. Would using the chute to get down really count as clearing the game? It seemed all too easy. The fact that the monster wasn't even trying to attack them was also making Hiroshi nervous. Was this a trap?

"Takuro, wait a sec—"

The monster made its move before he could finish the thought. Its thick right arm reached out for Takuro.

"Takuro, look out!"

Hiroshi shouted to him, but it was too late. The monster had Takuro by the shoulder. Except rather than instantly crushing him in its grip, it just stood there with its hand on his shoulder.

"Don't..." A familiar voice pleaded. "Don't open that... box..."

Takuro looked up over his shoulder at the monster in shock.

"Is that you, Naoki?" he asked.

But instead of answering, the monster continued, its speech labored, "Everyone will die... If you open that, the water tower will break... and blue insects will burrow into all of the students... STOP INTERFERING!"

The monster's tone suddenly changed. It bared its fangs vehemently, spraying saliva everywhere. Takuro jumped back, grabbed Hiroshi, and carried them both to the far corner of the roof. The monster was still flailing about over by the red box as if its arms had a mind of their own.

"You're still around? What a cockroach. Just disappear already! No, I can't... I have to save everyone..."

The two personalities residing within the monster seemed to be fighting, making this the perfect opportunity for the boys to escape.

"Takuro, I'll leave everything to you," Hiroshi said, still in Takuro's arms. "Once time begins to turn back, jump off the roof immediately."

“But it said we have to get out of here safely. I might survive that fall if I transform, but you’re just a normal human. From this height, you’d definitely —”

“So carry me when you take the plunge.”

Takuro’s eyes went wide at the thought.

“Don’t be stupid! I can’t put you in danger like that. We’re way too high up. I’m not even sure I’ll land safely. If I’m carrying you—”

“It’s our only option. Though regrettable, we haven’t the time to concoct any other plan,” Hiroshi said, looking Takuro square in the eye. “Doing nothing will guarantee a bad ending. So however slim the odds may be, we need to place our bets on doing *something*.”

“...Fine.”

Reluctantly, Takuro nodded in agreement. Hiroshi leaned over the bent fence and looked at the giant clock. It read 8:16, the correct time. That meant Shun and Kazuya hadn’t yet figured out how to turn back the master clock.

“Let’s jump as soon as we see the hands on that clock start to move backward. Until then, we’ll just have to keep running for our lives.”

“Okay. But what if—”

Takuro stopped himself and swallowed his words, but Hiroshi knew what he’d been about to ask: “What if time doesn’t reverse before the limit?” In that case, they’d just have to jump and forget about the plan. They wouldn’t be able to bring back the dead, but it would at least put them in a position to help save anyone they could in the courtyard. That was the worst-case scenario, however. The monster was still fighting with itself. If they could elude its clutches for another four minutes, victory would be theirs.

“This way!”

Hiroshi beckoned to Takuro, circling around to the shady side of the structure built behind the great clock. From here, they could hide while keeping one eye on the clock and one eye on the monster. The monster was still moving about strangely. Naoki must have been doing his very best. If he kept it up, they just

might make it. All that was left was for Shun to reverse time.

“I need a minute,” Takuro said as he leaned back against the wall.

His face was pale. He was probably still suffering from Naoki’s smackdown earlier, not to mention Mika’s loss. Of course he was exhausted. But they would need him to transform soon, which undoubtedly took a considerable amount of strength and energy. Hiroshi agreed that it would be a wise use of their scant remaining time to let Takuro recharge, but he sighed and shook his head when he caught a flash of something blue out of the corner of his eye.

“Takuro, I’m sorry, but it looks like there’s no rest for the weary.”

The small, blue creature now perched atop the fence turned its giant eyes on them. Wriggling its beak-like nose, it let out a high-pitched shriek. It couldn’t be more obvious this was no normal bird. In the shadow of its nose glinted sharp fangs.

“What the hell is that?” Takuro asked as he slowly, quietly stood up.

“I don’t know,” Hiroshi answered with a shake of his head.

It was conspicuously the same blueberry color as the other monsters, but he’d never seen this particular type before.

Kreee!

The small monster let out an unpleasant, ear-splitting cry and took off. It then extended its wing-like protuberances, halting in midair. Scientifically speaking, that should be impossible. What sort of ingenious trick was it employing in order to float? Hiroshi pushed up his glasses frames and leaned in closer for a better look at the bird-like monster.

“Look out!” Takuro shouted as he gave Hiroshi’s shoulder a hard shove.

Hiroshi lost his balance, toppling forward and to the left just as the avian monster swept past him at incredible speed. Its pointed, beak-like nose drove straight into the concrete wall. Cracks radiated outward from the point of impact. A slight chill went up Hiroshi’s spine. If Takuro hadn’t pushed him out of the way, it would have impaled him in the side instead of the wall.

“Th-Thank you... You saved me.”

“That thing’s bad news. Let’s move,” Takuro said as he started running.

The avian monster’s beak appeared to be embedded quite deep in the concrete, as it was having trouble pulling itself out. Hiroshi was curious, but had no interest in waiting around to be attacked again. He hurriedly took after Takuro.

The two boys headed for the stairs. It was too dangerous to stay out on the open roof, which was sincerely lacking in cover. Hiroshi had no qualms with retreating back to the third floor for now. There was no telling when the avian monster might free itself. They’d have to find something that might serve as a shield to keep it at bay.

Running along, Takuro suddenly stopped in the middle of the staircase. Caught unawares, Hiroshi smacked right into his back.

“What is it?”

Rubbing his nose, Hiroshi peered over Takuro’s shoulder. His eyes were fixated on the base of the stairs. His lips were trembling.

What is going on?

Hiroshi followed Takuro’s gaze and caught his breath. The entire floor was dyed blue. Upon closer inspection, he could see it was pulsating slightly. There were amoeba-like creatures covering it completely, merging and splitting as they crawled this way and that.

“Crap... We can’t go back down,” Takuro said, biting his lip. “Those are the things that attacked Mika. They emit some kind of acid or something. If you touch them, they’ll melt you instantly.”

“Then we’re trapped, are we?”

Hiroshi glanced up at the wall clock toward the bottom of the staircase. They had three minutes left now. He then turned around and looked at the door to the control room where Shun and Kazuya were. He wanted to call out and see how they were doing, but he resisted the urge. He didn’t have any useful advice or groundbreaking clues for them. He would only be distracting them.

“Takuro, let’s get ready to make the jump,” Hiroshi said, patting him on the

shoulder.

“But there’s still that bird thing—”

“If it tries to attack again, we’ll just jump then. Now let’s move,” he said, turning on his heels.

It would be a lie to say he wasn’t scared, but they couldn’t keep running forever. This was the time to stand and fight.

2

Turning away from the master clock, Shun looked over at Kazuya.

“Huh? What is it?”

Noticing the puzzled look on Kazuya’s face at the sudden attention, Shun leaned in closer and quickly asked, “You said Mr. Inoue told you a lot about the clock system, right? Do you know which teacher was in charge of the master clock?”

“He only ever told me that the principal was the only one who could access it, so it must have been him.”

“The principal...” Shun mused, stroking his chin pensively in much the same fashion Hiroshi would.

The principal was, all in all, a rather simple, straightforward man. He probably hadn’t thought all that hard about coming up with the passcode. It had to be something that was easy to remember.

“Do you happen to know when the principal’s birthday is?” Shun asked, turning back to the master clock display.

“No, but... I think the safe in the principal’s office took a four-digit code too.”

Safe? Four-digit code...?

“That has to be it!” Shun turned and grabbed Kazuya by the shoulders. “Do you remember the numbers?”

“Uh, it started with a one and a seven... Sorry, that’s all I remember. It was Hiroshi who cracked the safe, not me.”

“Thanks. I’ll ask him, then.”

His blood pumping, Shun leaped up and went straight for the control room door. When he opened it, however, he unwittingly gasped. The floor and walls just outside were completely blue. Amoeba-like monsters carpeted the concrete, pulsating disturbingly. Countless eyes all swiveled in Shun’s direction at once. His instincts screaming panic and danger, he quickly slammed the door.

There goes that... We’re trapped in here.

He gritted his teeth bitterly.

I can’t rely on Hiroshi anymore. Kazuya and I have to figure this out on our own.

Hiroshi carefully scanned the rooftop. The avian monster must have freed itself; it was no longer impaled in the cracked circle of concrete. Keeping his eyes peeled in 360 degrees, he clung to the fence. But when he glanced over the railing, he caught sight of the tragedy unfolding below.

“What in the...” muttered Takuro, who walked up behind him.

Blood was splattered across the freshly melting snow. Countless muddy footprints were tracked this way and that. A crowd of students was rushing toward the school gates.

What on earth was happening? As Hiroshi stared down at the gruesome scene in shock, he caught a glimpse of something blue out of the corner of his eye. His head instinctively snapped that way. There was a monster standing next to the gym, but it wasn’t Naoki. The monster that his consciousness resided in was still flailing about by the water tower.

Was it Anna, then? No. The monster Anna had become wasn’t nearly that large. And this one... This monster was covered in fresh, red blood. It let out a terrible howl before advancing toward some students huddled in a corner of the courtyard.

No! They’re all going to be killed! Run!

Hiroshi started to shout at the top of his lungs, but suddenly a second blue figure appeared and lunged for the bloody monster. It bared its fangs and sunk

them deep into the attacking monster's throat before it could reach the students. Blue fluid sprayed everywhere, and the horrid creature wailed in apparent agony.

"Run! Now!" the smaller monster yelled at the students.

It was Anna. It seemed she'd been fighting her own battle while the rest of them were wandering the school.

"Heads up, Hiroshi! Here it comes again!" Takuro bellowed.

Suddenly reminded of the danger he himself was in, Hiroshi's attention returned to the rooftop. The avian monster was now circling the water tower, its giant eyes locked on the two boys. Hiroshi could only assume it was waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

The bird-like monster's speed was beyond comprehension. Perhaps Takuro with his superhuman abilities might stand a chance of dodging it, but a normal human like Hiroshi was helpless. Especially here on the roof with no cover.

The more immediate problem, however, came from below. Hiroshi had been so fixated on the threat overhead that he hadn't even seen it coming. But when he felt a sudden, sharp pain in his right toe, he looked down immediately. A small amoeba monster had latched on to his foot. Wasting no time, Hiroshi quickly kicked off his shoe. The contact had been brief, a few seconds at most, but he could barely feel his toe anymore. There was only a faint, numb tingling.

"Look out!" Takuro shouted again.

Looking back up, Hiroshi spotted the avian monster racing toward him.

Shoot... I'm dead.

Hiroshi's life flashed before his eyes, and then Takuro. Something warm and wet splashed on his face.

"Gahhhhh!"

Takuro had jumped in front of him to protect him, but now toppled forward. A geyser of blood spewed from his chest.

"Takuro!"

Hiroshi pressed down as hard as he could on Takuro's chest with both hands, but the geyser didn't stop. Blood welled up between his fingers uninhibited.

"Why...?"

"Hiroshi... You've saved me a bunch of times," Takuro said between labored breaths. The light in his eyes was fading. "Sorry... This is game over for me. We might not be able to clear the game together, but... I know you'll figure something out..."

"Please, don't say any more. It's not over yet. You can't give up!" Hiroshi pleaded.

Takuro's lips moved slightly in response, but there was no sound. He fell utterly silent. His chest was still actively bleeding, however, which meant his heart was still pumping. He wasn't dead yet.

I have to do something quickly!

Gritting his teeth hard, Hiroshi got to his feet. Nearly the entire roof was blue now. The amoebas had been steadily creeping up from the third floor. If Hiroshi left Takuro where he was, they'd consume him the minute they got to him.

Hoisting the unconscious Takuro onto his back, Hiroshi set to climbing the fence. Supporting both his weight and Takuro's was quite a task. He had no idea how long he would last, but there was only one thought coursing through his mind: he had to get down the side of the building to safety.

Undoing his scarf, Hiroshi threaded it through the fence. The tops of the windows on the third floor would afford him a small foothold. Using the scarf as a lifeline, that's where he was aiming. He doubted the scarf was really strong enough to support two teenage boys, but this was do or die. He had to try his luck. Steeling himself, he gripped the scarf tightly with both hands.

Huh?

Sensing a dark presence, he looked down. Making its way up the wall from below was the bloody monster that had previously been rampaging in the courtyard. It was approaching in an unhurried fashion, as if just waiting for them to fall.

Where is Anna?

Hiroshi glanced over toward the gym and saw the other monster lying in a pool of blue blood seeping into the snow. The monster... Anna wasn't moving.

No... Not you too, Anna...

Anger flared within Hiroshi as he watched the monster crawl up the wall. He'd never felt such a dark hatred before, and he directed it all at the bloody monster in a glare. Looking closer, however, he could see that it had grown bigger. No, it *was* growing bigger. It continued to enlarge as it worked its way up the building.

Hiroshi checked the giant clock. Two minutes left.

What do I do?

At this rate, it was just a matter of time before the monster reached him. And yet there was nowhere to run. The rooftop was overrun by the amoeba monsters, the avian monster was still circling overhead, and the bloody monster was now waiting below.

It's no use. There's nothing more I can do.



Back in the control room, Shun was bouncing ideas off of Kazuya as they came to mind.

“How did you figure out the code in the principal’s office?”

“Apparently you could get it by combining some numbers found on the piano keyboard in the music room with a strange shape drawn on the blackboard in the guidance counselor’s office. But like I said, it was Hiroshi that put it together, not me. I’m not sure how it worked.”

“Try to remember. What were the numbers on the keyboard?”

“I told you, I... Oh!” Kazuya, whose face had been agonizingly twisted in deep thought, suddenly opened his eyes wide.

“Did you remember?” Shun asked, leaning in excitedly.

“Not the numbers on the piano, no... But right before he opened the safe, Hiroshi looked at the wall in the principal’s office and said, ‘Oh, they put the answer here, too.’”

“What was on the wall?”

“A map of Kyushu,” Kazuya replied, pursing his lips. “There was a red line drawn from northern Kyushu to Kagoshima prefecture...”

I guess this is it.

Just as Hiroshi was about to give up, the door to the roof burst open. A blue figure came streaking out of it, making a beeline for the avian monster circling overhead. It was small enough that Hiroshi thought someone had kicked a ball or something, but the truth was even stranger than that. It was the short, blocky monster, which wailed a high-pitched screech as it leaped into the air.

“...Mika?” Takuro asked feebly.

Fwuffy’s cry must have woken him up, or perhaps he had just fallen into delirium. Fwuffy, reaching its stubby limbs out as far as they would stretch, latched on to the avian monster.

Takuro...

Takuro looked up to see Mika standing before him.

“Mika!”

He held his hand out for her cheek. She was right there, yet for some reason he couldn't touch her.

The last thing I asked Fwuffy to do was to protect you. He's so smart. And quick. I swear he's just like you, right down to the short temper.

There, Mika's figure began to fade.

“No, please don't go...” Takuro moaned. “Mika, wait. I'm coming too.”

You can't. You have to live. Live for my sake.

She was melting away right into empty air.

You still have something to do, don't you?

And with that, she disappeared completely.

Hiroshi heard what sounded like nails scraping against glass overhead. Looking up, he gasped. The avian monster was coming down directly at him.

Shoot!

Hiroshi instinctively recoiled, but something seemed different this time. Something wasn't right. One of the bird's wings was missing. It looked like it had been torn off, blue blood dripping from its stump. So rather than flying, it was more like it was falling rapidly... For on its back was Fwuffy, who was also bleeding from several cuts as though it had been torn up by the avian monster's fangs.

Both monsters crashed hard into the asphalt rooftop. The dull sound of breaking bones reverberated in Hiroshi's ears. Blue blood splattered at his feet.

As the avian monster attempted to get up, Fwuffy—the right side of its body crushed—opened its jaws wide and closed them around the bird's head. A spray of blue blood shot forth from its decapitated neck. The bird now dead, Fwuffy looked up at Hiroshi and mewed like a kitten before collapsing on its face, never to move again. The amoebas quickly swarmed, gathering around the two corpses. Unable to tell the difference between friend and foe, they consumed both.

While the amoebas were distracted and congregating elsewhere, the blue carpet that was covering the roof parted. Hiroshi saw it and realized this moment might be his chance to get back down to the third floor. Hopping off the fence, he darted for the door.

Just as he was about to reach it, a massive shadow loomed over him. Shaking with fear, he looked up. There stood the blueberry-colored giant. Hiroshi sprinted for all he was worth, but the monster was just too fast. It plucked Takuro right off his back, fangs gleaming eerily.

A line connecting northern Kyushu and Kagoshima... The numbers one and seven...

“Oh!” Shun gasped.

The scattered clues he’d gathered began coming together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in his mind. He was on the verge of seeing the complete picture.

“I’ve got it. It’s National Route 3,” Shun muttered as he reached out for the master clock. “National Route 3 connects northern Kyushu and Kagoshima... But then what? National Route 3... Where do the one and seven come from? Route 3, Route 3... Oh, the square root of 3 is 1.732! That’s the answer!”

Shun carefully input the numbers one at a time with a slow and steady hand to prevent making even the slightest mistake. He had absolute confidence in his answer. That *had* to be it. It checked out, right down to the founding date of their school: March 2nd, 1732. It was just like something the principal would pick.

With all four numbers showing on the display, Shun pressed the enter key. And unlike before, this time a digital clock appeared on the LCD screen. There was only one minute left, but everything would be fine. All he had to do now was turn the clock back two hours.

The giant blue monster held Takuro in its right hand. Hiroshi panicked, thinking it would crush him right then and there, but that wasn’t how things played out. For some reason, the monster remained still.

“Takuro...” it said with Naoki’s voice. “I admit... that you might have changed. But that doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t change all the terrible things you did

to me, and I'm never going to forgive you for those."

Takuro's eyelids twitched, as if Naoki's words had reached him.

"So you can't die yet."

A soft light seemed to envelop the monster's hand. Color began to return to Takuro's pale face.

"The monster that ate you was born from my cells. I have the power to control them... So I'm going to give you my body. I won't let you die. You have to keep living... Keep living and pay for your sins. That is my vengeance."

The monster slowly kneeled down and laid Takuro gently on the asphalt. His eyes flickered open.

"Naoki..." Takuro quietly stammered with tears in his eyes. "Thanks... Naoki."

The monster—no—Naoki nodded once, then turned and walked away. He was headed right for where Fwuffy and the avian monster had gone down.

"Stop it! What do you think you're doing?" a shrill voice screamed.

Ignoring it completely, Naoki plunged himself into the teeming blue sea of amoebas.

"Are you crazy? You'll die!"

"I died a long time ago. This is just to make it final."

The amoebas instantly swarmed him too, covering his body.

"Nooooo!"

A shrill scream echoed across the rooftop. As Takuro and Hiroshi watched, the monster's blue skin began burning and melting away.

"AHHHHH! IT'S HOT! IT'S HOT! IT'S HOOOT! NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!
AAHHHHHHHHH!"

The monster flailed about, scratching at its throat.

"Urgh, no... I can't die... until I make this world ours..."

White smoke billowing from its body, it began crawling along the asphalt like a slug.

“I will... make this world ours...”

The monster’s eyes were glued on the red box containing the escape chute.

Oh, no!

Hiroshi immediately realized what it was trying to do.

Shun’s hand hesitated over the number pad. The master clock was now set back two hours. All that remained was to press the enter key, but a certain thought stopped him in his tracks.

Is this really for the best?

Even if they went back in time two hours, that wouldn’t change the fact that Takuro and the others had been eaten by monsters. So what if he went back a week instead, to right before they were all attacked? Could he save everyone then? No, he had to go further. If he went back to December of last year, he could make sure that terrible accident never happened. No, this had all started long before then. If he went back 20 years to when everything first began...

There’s no telling what’ll happen to us... But we have to put our hope in a better future.

Hiroshi recalled Naoki’s earlier warning.

“Don’t open that box... Everyone will die... If you open that, the water tower will break... and blue insects will burrow into all of the students...”

His eyes shifted to the giant clock. He could see the minute hand quivering slightly. They only had a few seconds left. There wasn’t any time to hesitate.

“Let’s go, Takuro.”

“Right.”

Instantly picking up on what Hiroshi was thinking, Takuro nodded resolutely. The boys kicked off the asphalt and bolted forward. Grabbing the melting monster as they ran, they charged headlong for the section of broken fence.

“Idiots, what are you—”

The three of them—the two boys and the arguing monster—fell through the air.

“Too late,” said Takuro.

“We win,” gloated Hiroshi.

Then, just as the giant clock was about to strike 8:20, its hands suddenly began to spin backward. 8:10... 8:00... 7:50... Time was turning back.

Good job, Shun! Hiroshi smiled as his consciousness began to fade. *Now everything will go back to as it was two hours ago...*

6:30... 6:20... 6:10... Two hours passed, yet the spinning hands showed no signs of slowing down. If anything, they were speeding up. They were turning so fast that the long hand was hardly visible, and it wasn't long before the short hand was doing the same.

At some point the eyeball statue had appeared atop the water tower. It seemed to float in the air before unleashing a bright flash of light. Unable to look at it directly, Hiroshi squinted. That was the last thing he remembered.

3

The girl wandered through the basement, her sister close behind. They stumbled across a statue of their god surrounded by stacks of boxes of various sizes. The girl slowly approached them. What could be inside?

She reached out for one that caught her eye—a small one sitting on top. It was just big enough to fit in her hands. She picked it up. It wasn't that heavy. She shook it and heard something inside like the rustling of dry leaves. The box itself was sealed shut with ancient strips of paper. The girl hesitated for a moment before she gave in to curiosity and attempted to rip off the paper.

“Don't open that!” someone shouted in her ear.

She jumped in surprise and turned around, but all she saw was her scared sister.

“Did you say something?”

She had to check, but her sister vehemently shook her head.

“This place is creepy. Can we go now? Please?” her sister begged, tugging on

her sleeve.

She was right, of course. The girl could sense something cold over her shoulder. She got the feeling something bad would happen if they stayed here too long.

“Yeah... You’re right.”

The girl put the box back in its place, grabbed her sister’s hand, and quickly turned to leave.

“Thank goodness,” she heard a relieved voice say.

The girl turned around as she reached the door and scanned the dim basement once more.

“Who’s there?” she asked, but no one answered.

“What is it?” her sister questioned, looking at her suspiciously.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Let’s go.”

Shutting the heavy door behind them, the two girls headed upstairs.

“I hope you two find happiness,” said the voice.

But this time, the girl didn’t turn around.

Chapter 13

TRUE END

1

Cherry blossom petals floated in through the open window, carried by a gentle spring breeze. It was the first day of a new trimester, and the classroom was filled with nervous excitement. The fact that they were now in their last year of middle school was at the forefront of everyone's mind. Everyone including Hiroshi.

He'd arrived to class early and took his seat, cracking open the thick tome on molecular genetics that he'd bought over spring break. But for some reason, he kept reading the same sentence over and over; nothing was sticking in his brain. He'd been like this all morning. The nerves were almost unbearable. The itchy fidgeting was so bad that he could almost swear a bug had crawled under his skin overnight. He had no idea why, either.

He just couldn't shake the feeling that something special was going to happen today. And his hunches were almost always right. They had been ever since he was a kid.

"It's true! I was almost at the top of the mountain when a bear appeared in front of me!" Takeshi declared from behind Hiroshi.

He seemed to be bragging about something as he leaned against the supply closet, surrounded by a gaggle of their classmates. While Hiroshi recognized many of the kids around Takeshi, he couldn't keep track of their names. It always impressed him just how wide Takeshi's circle of friends was.

"The other guys ran, but I was like, 'How often do you get to see a wild bear up close?' So I stayed."

"Liar. You probably only stayed behind because your legs gave out and you couldn't've moved even if you wanted to."

"N-No..."

"Oh, that's it, huh? I hit the nail on the head, didn't I?"

"No!"

Hiroshi's gaze shifted away from the panicking Takeshi, wandering over to the

windows. Sitting in front of them were Takuro and Mika, who had shoved their desks together and were gleefully looking at their smartphones. They'd said something about going to Disneyland over spring break, so perhaps they were looking at pictures and reminiscing.

Someone then suddenly patted Hiroshi on the shoulder.

"Good morning."

It was Anna.

"Oh, class president. Good morning."

"I'm not the president anymore," she said with a shrug before pointing to Hiroshi's book. "Is this what you bought at the bookstore by the station? I remember something about a book on butterflies as well. Let me borrow it sometime."

"How did you know that?"

"My mom saw you. She's a big fan of yours," she said with a smile. "She wants me to invite you over if you're free. Something about wanting your autograph before you become super famous."

"I see..." Hiroshi said half-heartedly, unable to tell if she was joking or not.

Their conversation, however, was interrupted, and their homeroom teacher entered. It was Mr. Inoue, just like last year. Seeing him, all of the students scurried to their seats. But they were quickly abuzz with all kinds of whispering. An unfamiliar boy had followed Mr. Inoue in. He looked nervous.

"I'd like to introduce you all to the new transfer student," announced Mr. Inoue.

"My name is Shun... It's nice to meet you all," the boy muttered shyly, almost hunched over.

Hiroshi hadn't been able to make out his last name, but for some reason hearing "Shun" gave him an intense feeling of déjà vu.

"Okay, Shun, you'll be sitting over there."

"Yes, sir."

Shun quietly walked over and took the seat the teacher had pointed out for him.



LIKEWISE.



IT'S
NICE TO
MEET
YOU.



MY
NAME'S
NAOKI.

LET'S
BE GOOD
FRIENDS!







2

On the outskirts of town was a great mansion. Violets were blooming with abandon all across the yard. An elegant woman with a wide-brimmed hat was sitting among them pulling weeds. A young, vibrant girl was running circles around her.

“Don’t trip now, darling,” the woman said to the girl, wiping sweat from her brow.

“I won’t!”

The girl looked up. Her right iris was blue, strikingly unlike her left... and just like the woman sitting among the violets.

“Mama, is there anything I can do to help?” the girl asked.

“Well, I’m going to water the flowers after this, so can you fill a watering can and bring it to me?”

“Yeah, sure!”

The girl nodded and, practically skipping, cut across the yard and went inside.

As the woman watched the violets swaying in the breeze, she felt happier than ever before. Compared to 20 years ago when she was called a heretic just for believing in a different god... When she had to hide her family in a cellar, fearing for their lives... Compared to all that, this felt like a sweet dream.

May these happy days never end... she looked up into the sky and prayed.

The girl found a large bucket next to the washing machine and filled it to the brim. Carrying it with both hands, she waddled along, nearly spilling it every other step of the way.

Mama said to bring a watering can, but then I’d have to take lots of trips to get enough water for the whole yard. This way, I only have to make one trip! Mama’s gonna think I’m so smart.

But unfortunately, the bucket was heavier than she’d expected.

“Ah!”

It didn't take long before it slipped her grip, sending water all over the hallway. The girl panicked, taking off in a hurry.

Oh no! Mama's gonna be so mad! I gotta find a towel!

The mansion was quite an old building. The flood of water in the hallway seeped through the thin floorboards, dripping down into the basement and onto an ancient wooden box that began to shake and rattle mysteriously.

Soon... Soon I will be free... Humans... Vengeance...

-THE END-

Afterword This is the final volume in the *Ao Oni* series. It was about four years ago now that I was first asked, “Would you write the novel version of this incredibly popular freeware game?” At the time, I was honestly surprised. I’d been involved in novelizations for games before and written countless stories where people die one after the other, but those were all essentially in the mystery genre. The murderer was always human. I’d never written a genuine horror story where people were attacked by an honest-to-god monster. I had to question my editor about whether I was really the right man for the job. But in the end, the original game was so intriguing and I had been wanting to try writing something different, so I took the job without much thought... When the book actually came out, the reception shocked me. I received so many letters from readers and words of encouragement that, before I even realized it, people were calling this my most

iconic title. Life can be so unpredictable. It's all thanks to noprops for creating such a compelling scenario and Ms. Karin Suzuragi's beautiful illustrations. I'm merely riding on the coattails of their greatness. I am truly grateful to have been involved in such an enjoyable project for so long.

I've had a rough idea of where I wanted this story to go since volume one. I didn't think I'd actually get to put all five volumes into writing, however, so I thought it would just be sort of a secret backstory that only I got to enjoy. The reason the entire thing has come to fruition is thanks to the readers supporting the series this whole time. Thank you all very, very much. I decided I would end things at an early stage—a chance meeting in the classroom. I'm overjoyed that this final scene, which has been incubating in my mind for oh-so-long, was brought to life in such splendor by Ms. Suzuragi's wonderful illustrations.

And so, the *Ao Oni* series comes to an end with this volume. But that doesn't mean Hiroshi and Shun's adventures are over. My mind's already racing with new ideas, and I hope I get the chance to continue their stories again one day. So I'm not going to say goodbye for now. Here's to meeting again sometime!

-Kenji Kuroda



The *Ao Oni* novelization has finally reached its conclusion! I'm so grateful to have been involved, illustrating the series for nearly three years now. I love the *Ao Oni* games, so it was both fun and fulfilling to help bring them to life. I'm sad that it's all over, actually.

To noprops, thank you so much for creating such a wonderful, entertaining game! The main route and hidden paths were so jam-packed with both horror and comedy elements that, in addition to having fun when I played it myself, I was able to enjoy it over and over again watching different streamers play it too.

To Mr. Kuroda, thank you for three years of good reads! The action scenes this time were especially cool and really thrilling. I was so glad Mika got her happy ending. As the story's gone on, I've found myself falling more and more in love with Fwuffy.

To my editors, especially Mr. H-moto, thank you so much for your in-depth guidance! Also, thank you for making the cover as cool as ever.

And to the readers, I'm sincerely grateful to you for sticking with us! Your support is what allowed us to make it this far. I hope we can do it all over again if we have a chance to meet in the future.





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Ao Oni: Forever

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